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ABSTRACT

The purposes of the Basic Writing Skills Assessment Project, begun in the spring of 1977, were to provide a review and assessment of the existing English proficiency program and to develop a data base on which generalizations might be made about the status of writing skills at Plymouth State College. This report was written on the basis of objective scores from the English proficiency examination, SAT-Verbal scores, grade point averages, essays, a faculty survey concerning reading and writing skills, a student survey of types of writing required in classes, course syllabi, and essay rating sessions with representatives from departments other than English. Separate sections of the report discuss the writing proficiency program at Plymouth, faculty perceptions of academic writing and the level of students' skills, resources, and recommendations to the English department and to college faculty. Appendixes include a survey questionnaire, transcripts of faculty rating sessions, sample student essays, and technical data. (Author)

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Basic Writing Skills Assessment Project:

An Interpretative Report

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By

Dr. Charles R. Duke
Coordinator of English Proficiency Examination Program

CS204083

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PREFACE

The purposes of the Basic Writing Skills Assessment Project, begun in the spring of 1977, were to provide a review and assessment of the existing English proficiency program and to develop a data base on which generalizations might be made about the status of writing skills at Plymouth State College. Objective scores from the English proficiency examination, SAT-Verbal scores, grade point averages, essays, a faculty survey concerning reading and writing skills, a student survey of types of writing required in classes, course syllabi, and essay rating sessions with representatives from departments other than English formed the basis on which this report was written. Separate sections of the report discuss the writing proficiency program at Plymouth, faculty perceptions of academic writing and the level of students' skills, resources, and recommendations to the English department and to college faculty. Appendices include a survey questionnaire, transcripts of faculty rating sessions, sample student essays, and technical data.

I am grateful to a number of people who contributed to making this report possible. Dr. Joseph Durzo of the New Hampshire College and University Council and Dr. Richard Sanderson, chairman of the English department at Plymouth, assisted in the initial design stages. Ms. Suzi Snook of the Plymouth Computer Staff, and the staff at the Registrar's office contributed statistical information. Ms. Barbara Blaha furnished details about the Reading Lab and Mr. Ronald Blankenstein provided information about Special Services. I would also like to thank Dr. Douglas Wiseman, Dr. Roger Tinnell, Dr. Larry Spencer, Dr. Margaret McQuaid, Dr. Mary Taylor, Dr. Constance Leibowitz who participated in the two essay rating sessions, and those faculty members who sent me samples of student writing for use in the study.

Charles R. Duke
Plymouth State College
February, 1978

I. A Summary of Findings

The following items represent the general findings of this study. They are presented here as a means of helping readers grasp the scope of the study and the types of research undertaken. None of the findings should be taken out of context, for many of them are inter-related. Care should be taken in reading the whole study to remember that in some instances the test sample was relatively small; consequently, statistics cited should be viewed only as possible guides and not as overwhelming evidence for or against a particular finding.

1. Not all students at Plymouth can satisfactorily pass a proficiency examination after a one semester writing course.

2. Some Plymouth students have avoided enrolling in Fundamentals of English after being identified as needing the course.

3. Plymouth may not be able to continue its present proficiency procedures if enrollment continues to rise.

4. The SAT-Verbal scores of Plymouth students do not provide sufficient qualitative discrimination in terms of writing skills for the scores to be used as the sole means for placing students in writing courses.

5. Placements in Fundamentals of English have decreased each year since 1975 while the number of students satisfying the proficiency requirement has increased each year.

6. General Studies students do not comprise the majority of the population of Fundamentals of English.

7. Faculty can find no clear consensus about strengths in the reading and writing skills of Plymouth students; however, faculty have no difficulty discerning weaknesses in those areas.

8. Course syllabi at Plymouth are not written to indicate clearly the amount or type of writing that will occur in a course, nor are statements about the expected quality of writing easily found.

9. Discrepancies exist between student and faculty perceptions of the types of writing that will occur in classes.

10. Confusion may exist about terminology used in writing assignments in disciplines other than English; i.e., essay vs. report vs. research paper.

11. Faculty members from academic disciplines other than English, given the same papers to read and evaluate, can agree on common characteristics of good, average and poor writing; these characteristics are similar to those identified by the English department in its proficiency program.

12. Approximately 60% of a representative sampling of students identified as being weak in writing skills have been able to achieve at least a "C" in English 120.

13. Over 75% of a representative sampling of students identified as being weak in writing skills have been able to maintain an overall grade point average of 2.0 or better at Plymouth.

14. Plymouth does not offer much aid to students seeking ways of overcoming remedial or developmental problems in reading and writing.

15. Correlations exist between the ratings of essay readers and the degree of syntactic maturity in sample essays.

16. Selected Plymouth students who have been identified as having competent writing skills show a control of syntax similar to that of skilled adults while selected Plymouth students identified as having below average writing skills demonstrate a control of syntax similar to that of eighth grade students.

17. Numerous grammatical errors are not characteristic of representative test or class writing samples.

II. The Writing Proficiency Program at Plymouth State College

In 1973, the Plymouth State College faculty approved the English department's proposal that all students satisfy a proficiency requirement in reading and writing before graduation. For economic and staffing reasons, the requirement for reading proficiency never was implemented. It remains as an approved action by the faculty, but no concerted effort ever has been made to enforce it. The writing requirement, on the other hand, has been pursued actively since its approval.

Early History

The program has undergone a number of changes since its inception. In the fall of 1973 when the program went into operation, students in all composition classes took a combined test of a standardized examination and a written essay. Students had to pass this examination; if they did not, they could take course work and then re-take the examination. Successful completion of English 120, the freshman composition course, did not satisfy the proficiency requirement.

Several mistakes occurred during the initial stages of the program. One error was allowing instructors in the various composition sections to devise their own topics and directions for the essay portion of the examination. Disparity in topics and directions led to a lack of consistency in evaluation and reader reliability because no instructor read and evaluated the essays from his section; papers were exchanged with other department members instead.

Another factor in the early operation of the program was that only two choices were available in evaluating a student's performance; either the student demonstrated sufficient competence and was thus exempted from future work in writing or the student was placed in English 120. It soon became evident to the writing instructors that the two part classification system did not discriminate sufficiently between those students needing more work in writing and those needing work in mechanics as well as in writing.

The Present

Because of the need for a more refined system of placing students, in 1975 the English department developed a three level classification system: high, middle, and low. The high students, or those exempted, could take additional courses in writing if they chose, but they were not required to do so. Students placed in the middle category enrolled in English 120; students identified in the low category enrolled in

English 100, Fundamentals of English, designed to meet the needs of students who displayed problems in mechanics of expression such as basic sentence construction, punctuation, verb/subject agreement and paragraphing. The course offered no credit and had a grading system of pass/no pass. Since 1975, course enrollment in Fundamentals has ranged from 60 to 75 students each fall although more than that number needing the course are identified through the examination.

The English Department also decided in 1975 that completion of English 120 with a grade of D or better would satisfy the proficiency requirement, and students did not have to re-take the proficiency examination after passing through the course. This was done for economic reasons because the Department could not provide sufficient staffing for course repeaters and also meet the needs of regular composition students who enrolled for each semester. The decision came after a period of testing revealed that 63% of those students who took English 120 could pass the test satisfactorily at the end of the course.

In all stages of the program, placement of students and exemption have been determined through the use of a combined raw score on the standardized test and performance on a written essay of an hour's duration.

Perspectives on Proficiency

Most colleges and universities have experienced problems similar to those at Plymouth when devising testing procedures to identify students' writing abilities. Most research points to the use of a standardized test for some elements of writing ability and then a written essay for other elements. Determining what critical writing skills should be tested is difficult. Based on what many writing instructors consider to be important elements of writing, Robert G. Noreen has suggested the following outline of skills and means of testing.[1]

Qualities Evident in a Well-written Essay	Possible Means of Testing Whether a Student has the Ability to Perceive and Incorporate these Qualities
1. The essay is "effectively" expressed.	1. Distinguish which sentence in a group is most effectively expressed.

[1] Robert C. Noreen, "Placement Procedures for Freshman Composition: A Survey," College Composition and Communication, May 1977, p. 143.

2. The topic is appropriate and limited.	2. Select appropriate subjects for limited compositions, and identify limited topics.
3. There is a continuity and development of ideas within each paragraph.	3. Group related and unrelated ideas; subordinate and coordinate ideas; determine the main topic, subtopic, and irrelevancies; select appropriate transitions to insure continuity.
4. The essay reveals the writer's knowledge of appropriate grammar.	4. Demonstrate ability to complete an artificial language exercise; in a paragraph show various parts and forms of a non-sense verb and noun.
5. The essay incorporates a lively, interesting, and varied vocabulary.	5. A high SAT score; show the ability to correlate like words and distinguish unlike words.
6. The essay shows sensitivity to language, meaning, and conventions.	6. Connotation/Denotation exercises; usage questions.
7. The essay shows evidence of good editing; good mechanics.	7. Punctuation, Spelling, Capitalization exercises.
8. The writer displays syntactic fluency and flexibility.	8. Sentence conversion items; student rewrites sentence according to specific directions, e.g. "Change the first verb to a noun used as the subject of a sentence." Sentence combining exercises.
9. The essay shows evidence of being polished and revised.	9. Show ability to complete sentence revision exercises.
10. The writing reveals the ability to incorporate analogical reasoning.	10. Writing sample.
11. The writing is imaginative, innovative and individualistic; reveals an active mind; shows ability to apply personal experiences to analysis.	11. Writing sample.

The principal difficulties with a written essay as an evaluation instrument are the time involved in administering, reading, and scoring, and the heavy reliance on one piece of a student's writing as an assessment measure.[2] The Plymouth English Department traditionally gives its examination to in-coming freshmen on the day before fall registration; this means that approximately 800 students take the examination early in the morning. The objective examination is computer scored. But by late afternoon or early evening, the standardized examination and the essays must be corrected so that placement decisions can be made in time to inform students for registration the following day. Reading and evaluating 800 essays has, at times, resulted in marathon sessions of essay reading. As the number of entering freshmen continues to rise, this aspect of the proficiency examination may become a problem and raise questions about the validity of the evaluation.

At the present time, essays are read by members of the English department and placed in one of three categories--high, middle, low--based on a three part scale devised originally by Paul Diedrich.[3] This practice has resulted in a fairly consistent placement procedure (see the remainder of this report for additional details).

SAT Scores

Researchers have suggested that SAT scores can be used as a means for placing students in writing classes. Yale University, for example, recently completed a study in which this practice was reviewed and found to be working fairly well.[4] The principal difficulty, however, in comparing Yale's data with that of Plymouth is the difference in population characteristics. The SAT-Verbal score distribution used as a means for placing Yale's class of 1979 looked like the following:

a. Under 640
b. 640-690
c. Over 690

The top level cut-off--an indicated 690--coincides with the Yale English department's guideline for placement of freshmen into advanced courses. The individuals in charge of the study at Yale acknowledged "that our low level of under 640 would be considered high for many other colleges."

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[2]See Sara E. Sanders and John H. Littlefield, "Perhaps Test Essays Can Reflect Significant Improvement in Freshman Composition: Report on a Successful Attempt," Research in the Teaching of English, Fall 1975, pp. 145-153.

[3]See Paul B. Diedrich, Measuring Growth in English, Urbana, Illinois: National Council of Teachers of English, 1974.

[4]Judith D. Hackman and Paula Johnson, "Yale College Freshmen: How Well Do They Write?" New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University, 1976 (mimeographed paper).

Such an observation is borne out by the distributions at Plymouth State College, shown in Table 1.

Table 1

COMPARATIVE RANGE OF SAT-VERBAL SCORES FOR PROFICIENCY EXAM
1975 & 1977

Score Range	Fundamentals		Composition I		Exempt	
	1975	1977	1975	1977	1975	1977
200-249	11	4	2	4	0	0
250-299	18	7	19	24	0	0
300-349	33	13	80	102	1	0
350-399	28	15	126	168	3	33
400-449	18	9	147	168	8	19
450-499	7	0	113	89	21	24
500-549	2	0	56	39	18	21
550-599	0	0	13	12	14	4
600+	0	0	3	0	8	4

A slight shift in placements seems to be emerging over the two year period, 1975-1977. Placements in Fundamentals of English appear to be decreasing slightly while the numbers in English 120 and also in the proficient category seem to be increasing. In most instances, though, the number of students passing or failing the essay portion of the examination remains somewhat constant. This creates a problem, for in a population such as Plymouth's, correlation between SAT-Verbal scores and satisfactory student performance on a written sample is not particularly high; hence using SAT-Verbal scores as a means for placing students at Plymouth does not appear feasible at this time. See Table 2 for a profile of a test sample, September 1977.

Table 2

COMPARATIVE RANGE OF SAT-VERBAL SCORES AND ESSAY RATINGS FOR SEPT. 1977

	Fundamentals	Composition	Exempt	Essay	
				Failed	Passed
200-249	4	4	0	3	0
250-299	7	24	0	4	0
300-349	13	102	0	15	1
350-399	15	168	33	17	3
400-449	9	168	19	12	12
450-499	0	89	24	3	11
500-549	0	39	21	0	8
550-599	0	12	4	0	5
600+	0	0	4	0	4
	48	606	105	54	44

Two Year Students

At various times, Plymouth faculty members have expressed a belief that the presence of two year students, particularly those enrolled in the General Studies Program, has a negative effect upon the academic achievement profile of the college. Faculty have also expressed the belief that General Studies students should be required to take Fundamentals of English and additional English courses to bring their skills up to a level equal with those of four year students. Table 3 provides a partial picture of the performance of General Studies students on the proficiency examinations since 1975, when the General Studies program won approval from the faculty.

Table 3

PERFORMANCE OF GENERAL STUDIES STUDENTS ON PROFICIENCY TESTS

	No. GS Students Enrolled	No. GS Students Taking Test	No. Identified For Fundamentals
Fall 1975	67	--	15
Fall 1976	99	85	17
Fall 1977	77	46	8

As can be seen from Table 3, not all General Studies students take the proficiency examination, but of those who do, the percentage needing Fundamentals of English is not high. One of the possible weaknesses in the creation of the Fundamentals course, however, was the option that students could elect to stay out of the course and attempt the examination again; if they scored well enough, they might by-pass Fundamentals and enroll in English 120 or even--in rare cases--perform well enough to be exempted from any writing course. Since 1975, only about five students have achieved the latter.

Some Considerations

Since 1973, the English department at Plymouth has tested over 4,000 students. In that time, certain generalizations have emerged about student performance on the proficiency examinations. In most cases, approximately 10-13% of the in-coming freshmen in any given class will satisfy the proficiency requirement; 73-80% will be identified as needing English 120 and 8-14% will be identified as needing Fundamentals of English.

The previous figures indicate that a substantial number of students satisfy the proficiency requirement. No specific guidelines exist for determining what is or is not an optimum number for exemption, since each college has distinctive population and economic characteristics. However, the Educational Testing Service (ETS) has produced the following categories and percentages as a reasonable guide, based upon student performance on the ETS Test of Standard Written English.[5]

Table 4

ETS SUGGESTED PLACEMENT BASED ON TSWE SCORE

Category	Description	TSWE Score	Proportion
I	Exemption, contingent upon demonstrated writing skill	60	4%
II	Regular (1 semester)	45-59	46%
III	Regular (2 semesters)	35-44	27%
IV	Remedial	20-34	23%

[5]See Hunter M. Breland, "Can Multiple-choice Tests Measure Writing Skills," The College Board Review, Spring 1977, pp. 11-13, 32-33.

ETS researchers suggest that those students scoring 60 or above on the TSWE should be required to complete a short essay writing experience; based on the combined results, decisions could then be made on granting exemption. Students in the other categories would not be asked for a writing sample. Performance in the appropriate classes, though, would be monitored carefully and if a student demonstrated a higher degree of proficiency than suggested by the TSWE score, provision for additional testing and movement from one category to another could be made.

The TSWE is not required for entrance to Plymouth at this time. Some effort toward experimenting with the test or a similar instrument, though, would seem to be appropriate, since complaints about student writing have not diminished, and the English department is not prepared to suggest that the present procedure is perfect. Moving to the use of such tests would help to eliminate several of the existing problems. First, it would allow the English department to predict with more accuracy the number of sections of writing courses needed for each semester; second, it would tend to reduce the number of essays that would have to be read and evaluated.

The major shift, however, in the English department's use of the original mandate from the faculty has been toward more appropriate placement and less toward simple proficiency. The adoption of the three part classification system in 1975 demonstrates this concern.

III. FACULTY PERCEPTIONS OF ACADEMIC WRITING AND THE LEVEL OF STUDENTS' SKILLS

Background

Because writing and reading are common activities in all disciplines, students' problems in these areas necessarily involve all faculty. Frequently, however, the discussion of such problems on an inter-departmental basis can be difficult or, at worst, simply non-existent. Part of the difficulty stems from the absence of a familiar and precise terminology with which faculty can discuss reading and writing. What one faculty member may mean by "grammar" or "comprehension" may not be what another person means; when one talks about "sloppy writing," the reference may mean anything from penmanship to imprecise expression and thought.

Another factor is the notion that reading and writing problems are the sole province of the English department. Overlooked in such an assumption is that basic activities for communication in any subject area require some form of reading and writing. Ignored as well are the specific problems in both reading and writing peculiar to the material in a discipline. These problems often remain unaddressed because "everyone knows how to read and write." In a limited sense such a belief may be true, but it fails to acknowledge that each discipline presents unique reading and writing requirements which might be handled better by experts in those fields than by English instructors. Secondary schools throughout the nation are slowly coming to that realization and are requiring that teachers in all disciplines take appropriate courses to help them meet the needs of their students in reading and writing. Such realism, however, has yet to make much of an impact upon college campuses throughout the country.

Faculty Survey

In an effort to determine how faculty perceive reading and writing, members in all departments were asked to respond to a survey questionnaire.[6] A return rate of 42% with all eleven academic departments participating provides a basis on which some tentative generalizations can be made.

The survey consisted of fifteen questions which focused on present practices in dealing with reading and writing in classes. Most of these same questions had been asked of faculty in another study done at the

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[6]Adapted from Rhoda T. Sherwood, "A Survey of Undergraduate Reading and Writing Needs," College Composition and Communication, May 1977, pp. 145-149.

University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee; the rate of return in that sample was 19%. The questionnaire addressed both reading and writing because a fairly high correlation seems to exist between reading and writing abilities.

Results of Survey

When asked to respond to open-ended questions about reading, faculty members did not display any clear consensus. The comments on weaknesses, however, showed more consistency. Along with the inability to comprehend the main idea came frequent mention of the inability of students to synthesize what they had read, of weaknesses in drawing inferences from material, and of a lack of attention to significant details. Mentioned less often were weakness in vocabulary, inability to read quickly, and display of negative attitude toward reading.

Upon being asked to respond to more specific questions about reading, the faculty displayed a more readily apparent consensus. The results are shown in Table 5. In a number of instances, however, the percentages in Table 5 will not total an even 100 because often more than one item could be ranked in a question and not all people responded to every question. Wherever possible, the responses of the faculty at the University of Wisconsin are listed for comparative purposes.

Table 5

RESULTS OF FACULTY SURVEY - READING

Univ. Wisc.	Plymouth		
		A.	Reading skill most important for success in a course
81%	74%		Understanding the main idea
50%	54%		Comprehending significant details
62%	38%		Reaching valid conclusions
51%	31%		Making critical evaluation of content
--	27%		Drawing inferences
		B.	Types of reading most frequently required
69%	90%		Textbook
65%	72%		Articles from periodicals
40%	52%		Chapters from supplementary texts
--	23%		Articles from newspapers
--	14%		Abstracts
		C.	Approximate number of pages of required reading per week
--	90%		Less than 50 pages
--	44%		Between 50-100 pages
--	10%		Over 100 pages

Some faculty expressed a reluctance to provide answers because they were not entirely certain that they could tell how well students were reading. Part of this difficulty in measuring reading skills may lie in the fact that faculty seldom see direct results of student reading; that is, students do not always have to produce a "product" when assigned reading, but when asked to write, students must produce tangible evidence of their skills.

From the faculty response about reading, however, one could assume that students in most classes at Plymouth can expect to read from at least one other source besides their textbooks, usually periodicals. The weekly amount of reading in a course will not, in most cases, exceed

50 pages; hence the student carrying five courses a semester can look forward to approximately 250 pages of assigned reading per week.

When asked to indicate their overall judgment of students' reading skills, more than half of the faculty responding (62%) indicated that they found students' reading skills to be adequate; 38% found the level of reading skill poor and only 4% found the level to be more than adequate. Slightly more than half of the faculty responding in the University of Wisconsin sample (57%) considered the reading skills of their students to be adequate, while 39% felt that such skills were less than adequate.

In the area of writing skills, faculty were much more detailed in their assessments, perhaps, again, because they felt that they had seen much tangible evidence in their classes. Asked, for example, to pinpoint some of the weaknesses in student writing, faculty members cited the following items, listed in the order of their frequency of mention.

a. Sentence structure
b. Organization of material
c. Spelling
d. Absence of clarity
e. Paragraph unity/structure

Identifying student strengths in writing was apparently not possible. Items cited were too infrequently reported to be of any use in forming generalizations. But when asked to respond to specific questions about writing, faculty members again were able to reach a fairly substantial amount of agreement. See Table 6 for their ratings.

Table 6

RESULTS OF FACULTY SURVEY - WRITING

	A. Most important writing skill for success in courses
70%	Organization
42%	Sentence structure
40%	Spelling
38%	Punctuation/capitalization
31%	Paragraph structure
31%	Research skills
	B. Frequency of writing for classes (excluding exams and quizzes)
28%	Weekly
28%	Once or twice a semester
22%	Monthly
16%	Bi-weekly
	C. Form of examination most frequently used in classes
46%	Combination essay/objective
36%	Objective
32%	Essay
	D. Relative weight given to quality of student writing in assignments
27%	Extremely important
38%	Equal in importance to other factors
25%	Less important than other factors

These responses suggest that students can expect that faculty members who stress writing in their classes will be looking for organizational skill, ability to form appropriate sentence structures, and correct spelling; in slightly lesser degrees they will be looking at punctuation/capitalization, paragraph structure and research skills. No clear consensus emerged about writing frequency so the student may have difficulty anticipating that factor in a course. The same may be said about the relative weight given to the quality of the writing done for a course. In the case of tests, however, the student can anticipate a fairly high proportion of combination essay and objective examinations, with the essay part of such examinations being quite short, perhaps a paragraph or two.

Course Syllabi

Another potential source of information about the emphasis upon writing in academic departments is course syllabi. Although not all instructors indicate specific writing requirements on their syllabi, a search in the office of the Dean of the College as of June 1977 revealed that out of 652 syllabi, only 26% (173) indicated that any kind of writing activity would occur in classes. In conjunction with this study, approximately 200 freshmen and sophomores were asked to list all courses which they had taken or were presently taking at Plymouth and to identify the writing activities in each. Students identified 206 courses and indicated that 66% (138) contained some writing activity. The exact percentages by department are provided in Table 7.

Table 7

DEPARTMENTAL OFFERINGS OTHER THAN ENGLISH CONTAINING WRITING AS INDICATED BY COURSE SYLLABI AND STUDENTS

Department	Percentage of Syllabi indicating writing	Percentage of courses identified by students
Art	31% (12)	63% (7)
Business	20% (11)	54% (18)
Education	60% (22)	92% (13)
Foreign Languages	43% (25)	90% (10)
Mathematics	0% (0)	0% (0)
Music	23% (11)	28% (2)
Philosophy	27% (6)	100% (7)
Physical Education	30% (30) major 1% (1) non major	65% (15)
Psychology	56% (13)	92% (12)
Science	13% (8) major 1% (1) non major	85% (36)
Social Science	42% (33)	85% (18)

"Writing activity" was defined loosely during this search in an effort to give acknowledgement wherever writing was mentioned; if a course syllabus indicated that essay exams or quizzes would be used, that was counted as writing activity although there might not be any other indication of writing activity in the course. The same was true if lab reports or required notebooks were mentioned. As a consequence, the figures in Table 7 should be regarded only as a general view, since some of the outlines on file may not have been the most current and other courses may have been offered and dropped without the outline being removed.

The student identification of where writing occurs is important, primarily because the students in the sample were freshmen and sophomores and thus would be taking 100 and 200 level offerings. These students were definitely involved in what they perceived to be writing activity; the frequency of this activity, however, was not determined.

The types of writing called for in course syllabi were compared with the types of writing cited by faculty respondents in the questionnaire survey and with responses of students, the same group of freshmen and sophomores previously mentioned. The results of the comparison can be seen in Table 8.

The discrepancy among faculty stated response, course syllabi description and student response is marked. Although faculty may, in some instances, give students separate sheets for assignments and writing instructions, including in a syllabus a stated intention to require writing and the amount and type to be done would seem to be a useful way of alerting the student to the relative importance such activity will have in the course. Student perceptions were, of course, restricted to the courses at the 100 and 200 levels, which may account for some of the discrepancy, but certainly not all.

Table 8

COMPARISON OF FREQUENCY OF DISTRIBUTION FOR DIFFERENT TYPES OF WRITING IN COURSE SYLLABI, FACULTY QUESTIONNAIRE RESPONSE AND STUDENT IDENTIFICATION

Type of Writing	Frequency in Course Syllabi	Frequency in Questionnaire	Frequency in Student Response
Abstracts	--	8%	--
Article Reviews	8%	32%	.6%
Book Reviews	8%	24%	9%
Case Studies	2%	--	--
Essays	16%	40%	32%
Essay Tests/Quizzes	16%	32%	52%
Homework Writing	4%	--	4%
Journals/Logs	6%	22%	4%
Lab Reports	.5%	22%	2%
Lesson/Unit Plans	12%	22%	2%
Letters	4%	--	2%
Reports	14%	--	2%
Scripts	.5%	--	--
Term Papers	31%	56%	43%

Table 7 and Table 8 identify another problem that must be considered. Definitions of various types of writing often differ, and it is not possible always to determine from individuals' responses exactly how they are using a particular term when describing the writing activity. In some cases, admittedly, this does not cause any conflict. Journals or logs, letters, and reviews--few problems arise between faculty and students when defining these. But when the terms "report," "essay," and "term paper" are used by faculty and students, the problem of definition becomes more acute because the definition as perceived by the student, at least, in large measure dictates how an assignment is approached.

The essay, or expository essay, commonly found in most freshman writing classes, constitutes a fairly substantial amount of the writing a student will do, particularly in the social sciences and the humanities. Essays conventionally have been assigned to students to aid them in gaining some imaginative control over the material in a course. Asking for an essay has traditionally been asking for the invention of an idea whose expression or development may be new or at least reflect some original thinking.

Reports, on the other hand, suggest something both formally and pedagogically different. Laboratory reports, book reports--these tend to follow a fairly rigorous structure; consequently such reports are very different from essays. But when no organizational priciples are provided for a report, it can be more difficult to write than an essay. In such cases, reports often become little more than raw collections of data. This kind of performance frequently carries over into research papers, which may be called "long reports." Perhaps only in business does the term "report" carry with it a fairly definite suggestion of structure, purpose and audience.

Students who are given writing assignments they are unable to understand in subjects with which they are unfamiliar tend to write reports--and usually inferior ones. The uncertainty of purpose and form often reveals itself in weak organization and even more in basic compositional errors. Such behavior suggests that at least one possible source of students' writing weaknesses is not their inability to write, but rather poorly expressed and defined assignments. Instructions such as "write a 'paper' on...and hand it in on..." encourage poor performance by placing unnecessary burdens on the student who may already be experiencing difficulties with the course material.

Clarification of terms and careful instructions about purpose, audience and form can be positive steps toward helping students understand what is expected of them. Such clarification is not overly time-consuming and if it results in a superior product, then the time spent is not wasted. Some faculty have already begun to take steps in this direction in an effort to help students perceive the scope, structure and importance of an assignment.

Written Assignment: Fabritek Corporation[7]

	Prepare a carefully thought-out and well written (essay) in two parts:	(identification of writing form)
	Part I. What should Stewart Baker do:	
Recommends Structure	Part II. (As president of Fabritek), what would be your short term and long term concerns about this operation? What would you do?	(identifies voice to be used in writing)
	Please (limit your paper to not over four pages of double-spaced, typed text).	(identifies mechanical specifications)
	(Please put your best foot forward. It is time to recognize that every piece of work we do presents us to others in a good or bad light and forms lasting impressions. Sloppy written work will dull an otherwise bright image every time!)	(provides a reminder for the students about importance of good writing and implies its importance for evaluation of assignment)

The student who attempts the above assignment will have at least some of the perimeters of the task in mind when beginning. The same student also receives a grading rationale, which again reinforces the notion of audience, voice and general guidelines for acceptability. See Table 9. If this attention to establishing written assignments and evaluation procedures was stressed in all academic departments, in all courses, it would represent a significant movement toward recognizing and enforcing the need for appropriate quality in student writing. Done only in occasional situations, however, the practice tends not to have lasting effects on students and their perceptions of what writing should be.

[7]Assignment developed by Duncan McDougall, Assistant Professor of Business, Plymouth State College, Plymouth, New Hampshire.

Table 9

A PAPER GRADING RATIONALE[8]

Assumptions:

1. The student is a newly-hired business school graduate (BSBA)
2. I am his boss and am receiving his first written output, as well as the first example of his analytical work.

Therefore, In Reading These Papers I Am Looking For:

1. A clear statement of the purpose of the assignment (or objective for the study).
2. Evidence that the writer has explored the subject data thoroughly, has applied his knowledge to it, has thought through any ideas he has had for future actions (i.e. alternatives) in terms of his stated business objective, and has reached a decision.
3. Evidence that the writer can think in an orderly way.
4. Evidence that the writer can express his thoughts clearly using the English language in an acceptable manner.

Essay Rating Experiment

In an effort to establish dialogue among departments about writing, intensive reading/rating sessions were held with representatives from six academic departments on the Plymouth campus. Two sessions, with three representatives at each session, occurred. The purposes of these meetings were to determine what criteria faculty members use to evaluate student writing, and to determine if any correlation might exist between the ratings of these groups and those of the English department.

The holistic method of reading student papers became the basis of the experiment.[9] This approach calls for quick reading and overall assessment of each piece of writing, rating each piece on a three point scale: 1 being the lowest, 2 the middle, and 3 the highest. The method,

[8] Ibid.

[9] See Charles R. Cooper, "Holistic Evaluation of Writing" in Charles R. Cooper and Lee Odell, eds., Evaluating Writing: Describing, Measuring, Judging, Urbana, Illinois: National Council of Teachers of English, 1977, pp. 3-31.

used by Educational Testing Service in Princeton, New Jersey for a number of years in training readers to rate Advanced Placement essays and now employed extensively by researchers in the field of writing, has proven to be an accurate means of placing writing samples in general categories. It is also the method used by the Plymouth English department in rating proficiency essays.

The basic procedures for each of the rating sessions were identical. Faculty readers received twenty essays drawn at random from those written at various times from 1973-1976 for the English proficiency examination. All essays were selected from among the three categories of high, middle and low quality writing, were in the students' original handwriting, and had all identifying marks removed. Each person read and then rated each of the twenty essays. Then the group leader tabulated the results. From this tabulation came ratings in common at each general level. Readers were then asked to examine specific essays from each level which the readers had agreed upon in their ratings. From these, the readers developed a list of criteria for each level which could be used to identify writing that might be placed in that category. Then the readers re-read several essays upon which they had disagreed and re-evaluated the essays in light of the developed criteria.

Questions about rater reliability often arise in studies of this type. Present research (Follman and Anderson, 1967; Diedrich, 1974; Cooper, 1975)[10] indicates that a rater reliability coefficient of .80 or better is suitable for program evaluation, and that a reliability coefficient of .90 is sufficient for individual growth measurement and research.

After the rating sessions had been completed, rater reliability was checked. The results indicated a high reliability factor. The agreement between Group 1 and Group 2 of the faculty raters was .91; between Group 1 and the English department .85; the overall rater reliability coefficient for all three groups was .87, well within the margin for program evaluation.

A comparison of the criteria established by the six representatives from academic departments and that used by the English department reveals that, for the most part, faculty are perceiving writing in much the same manner as is the English department. See Tables 10-12 for the three sets of criteria.

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[10] See John C. Follman, and James A. Anderson, "An Investigation of the Reliability of Five Procedures for Grading English Themes," Research in the Teaching of English 1, (1967), pp. 190-200; also Paul B. Diedrich, Measuring Growth in English, Urbana, Illinois: National Council of Teachers of English, 1974; and Charles R. Cooper, "Measuring Growth in Writing," English Journal, March 1975, pp. 111-120.

Table 10: GENERAL CRITERIA FOR EVALUATING ESSAYS - English Department

	High	Middle	Low
IDEAS	Student shows thought on the topic and writes what he believes, discussing each main point long enough to show clearly what he means; each main point is supported with arguments, details and examples; his points are clearly related to the main idea or impression he is trying to convey.	Gives evidence of trying to guess what the teacher wants and writes only what he thinks will get him by; points are not explained carefully and support is often missing.	Difficult to tell what points the student is trying to make or else they are so inappropriate that if the student had stopped to consider he might have known they made no sense; points are asserted, not explained; facts are often inaccurate.
ORGANIZATION	Paper begins at a good point, has a sense of movement, gets somewhere and then stops; paper has an underlying plan that a reader can follow, never leaving him in doubt of where he is; main points are treated at greatest length or with greatest emphasis, others in proportion to importance.	Organization of paper is conventional and standardized; one paragraph introduction, three main points, each treated in one paragraph, and a conclusion that often seems tacked on or forced. Some trivial points are treated in greater detail than important points, and there is usually some deadwood that could be cut.	Paper starts anywhere and goes anywhere. Main points are not clearly separated from each other, and they come in random order. Paper seems to start in one direction and then another, losing the reader.
TONE (Flavor?)	Writer sounds like a person and not a committee; writer appears sincere and candid and he writes about something he knows--often from personal experience.	Writer usually tries to appear better or wiser than he is; tends toward lofty sentiments and broad generalizations; does not put in the little details that show that he knows what he is talking about. Writing may be impersonal and correct, but colorless, without personal feeling or imagination.	Writer reveals himself well enough but without realizing it; his thoughts and feelings are of an uneducated person; his way of expressing himself differs from usual standards of written English.

Table 11: GROUP I ESSAY CHARACTERISTICS - Philosophy, Art and Foreign Languages

	High	Middle	Low
IDEAS	Sound evidence; clarity; no padding; logical development; analytical thought rather than superficial treatment.	Ideas sound, reasonable, thoughtful; some support of ideas but not fully supported or developed; absence of specifics, use of cliches may suggest insincerity; may not respond to question completely.	Lack of imagination; lack of specific examples and concrete detail; attempt to answer question defeated by lack of basic communication skills; absence of experience limits ideas; opinion is used instead of proof.
FORM	Logical development; speaking to the point; timing; limitation of topic; coherence; prepares reader; solid conclusion; limitation of apologetic phrasing--I feel, in my opinion, etc.	Attempt at introduction; logical development may be present; conclusion may be marked but not carried out; does not move well to conclusion; little evidence of planning; may not establish clear relationship among parts.	Absence of introduction and conclusion; no central idea; lacks coherence, movement or overall organization; tries to follow order of question but does not speak to question; many apologies/fillers; word repetitive; conclusion if present, weak.
LANGUAGE	Alive/descriptive; imaginative when appropriate; underlining of important words; word selection and nuances appropriate; few errors in spelling or agreement; good technical control (grammar, punctuation, syntax).	Frequent misspellings; vagueness; may have faulty references; grammatical errors; imprecision of expression; adequate vocabulary; variety in sentence construction; some spark and vivacity in phrasing; some repetition and filler.	Many errors in grammar and spelling; little or no variety in sentence construction; imprecision of expression; wordy and repetitive.

Table 12: GROUP II ESSAY CHARACTERISTICS - Physical Education, Natural Science and Education

	High	Middle	Low
IDEAS	Balance of ideas; use of examples for documentation/ support; focus on question; develops ideas fully; good visualization; objective; sense of emphasis; personality of writer comes through.	Evidence of, but not development of ideas; some support and evidence; narrowness of scope; weak thought development; some personality of writer coming through.	Lack of development; little support for ideas; incomplete response; little evidence of author's view; narrow approach; very little visualization.
FORM	Good introduction; good summary; good paragraph flow; good transition; variety of sentence structure; unity within paragraph.	Some evidence of unity; paragraph structure not strong; some clarity; awareness of need for conclusion; general structure not strong.	Weak paragraph structure; poor planning; poor transition, weak flow; some introduction, some conclusion; rambles; lack of unity.
LANGUAGE	Good appearance (neat); no glaring errors in punctuation or spelling; appropriate vocabulary; use of figurative language.	Sentence construction appropriate; some sophistication of words; adequate punctuation and spelling; language fluency weak; tends to be apologetic in some instances.	Inappropriate word use; incomplete sentences; poor agreement; weak vocabulary; poor spelling; unimaginative use of language; poor appearance.

Academic Performance

Since much discussion on campus has centered on the effect which students' inability to write has had on their performance in classes in all departments, 418 students randomly selected from the test population in English proficiency exams, from November 1973 to May 1975, were studied to determine their academic performance as indicated by grade point averages (GPA). Principal attention was given to the population in the highest group--those qualified for proficiency--and those in the lowest group. A small sampling of 30 students formed a contrast in the middle group. Of the test population, 29.7% in the high group, 30% in the middle group, and 13.4% in the low group have graduated. 25.6% of the high group, 30% of the middle group, and 26.9% of the lower group are still in attendance. Table 13 shows the GPA range of each group.

Table 13

GPA RANGE OF SAMPLING FROM TEST POPULATION

GPA Range	High Group (n=172)	Middle Group (n=30)	Low Group (n=216)
3.6-4.0	22.1%	3.3%	2.8%
3.1-3.5	30.8	16.7	9.3
2.6-3.0	26.2	30.0	18.5
2.1-2.5	9.3	30.0	28.2
1.6-2.0	4.7	13.3	19.9
1.1-1.5	2.3	6.7	9.7
0.6-1.0	1.7	--	4.6
0.0-0.5	--	--	4.2
No record	2.9	--	2.7

Using the declared majors of the students in the test sample, an effort was made to determine what percentage of students came from the various general programs in the college. The distribution appears in Table 14.

Table 14

DISTRIBUTION BY MAJOR PROGRAM OF SAMPLE POPULATION

Program	High Group	Low Group
Business	21.0%	34.8%
Education (includes all education programs in all departments)	27.8	16.4
Liberal Arts (includes programs in all departments)	22.1	13.0
Physical Education	10.5	18.0

As might be expected, the distribution is fairly equal in the high group but the bulges in the low group may be cause for some concern. Such distributions suggest that admissions screening in these areas may need re-examination.

Another area of concern for the college is revealed in the GPA ranges of students within the low group who have withdrawn from college. Although it is difficult to pinpoint the reasons why students leave an institution, the evidence in Table 15 suggests that academic performance may not be one of the key factors for a substantial number.

Table 15

GPA RANGES OF STUDENTS IN LOW GROUP WHO WITHDREW

GPA Range	Low Group Withdrawals	
3.6-4.0	3.3%	
3.1-3.5	8.9	
2.6-3.0	16.7	56.7%
2.1-2.5	27.8	
1.6-2.0	22.2	
1.1-1.5	3.3	
0.6-1.0	2.2	
0.0-0.5	8.9	
No record	6.7	

Of even more immediate concern for the English department, however, is the distribution of grades in composition classes for the three groups; this may be seen in Table 16 where the grades of the test sample appear.

Table 16

DISTRIBUTION OF GRADES IN FRESHMAN WRITING CLASSES
1973-1975

Grade	High Group	Middle Group	Low Group	
A	9.3%	13.3%	3.7%	
B	8.7	20.0	14.7	62.4%
C	2.3	23.3	44.0	
D	0.6	--	8.3	
F	--	--	3.7	
CR (credit given)	50.6	26.7	3.7	

From this distribution, it can be seen that 62.4% of the students in the low group have been able to achieve a C or better in Composition

while only 3.7% have failed. Further study of the test sample revealed that over half of the population in the low group never took another English course after passing through the required writing experience; only 50% of the students in the high group took other English courses, excluding literature ones, with only 40% electing to enroll in the department's literature offerings. These figures reveal a substantial loss of students in both groups; yet the department's grading suggests that the students apparently could achieve adequately in the offered writing courses; however, a fairly substantial percentage of the low students enrolling in reading courses experienced some difficulty--over 50% obtained GPA's of less than 2.0 in literature courses, while approximately 40% had GPA's of less than 2.0 in non-literature courses within the English department.

Several important factors emerge from the study of the academic performance of these students. Thirty-one per cent of the students in the low group never took composition before they withdrew but 56.7% of the students in the low group who withdrew had GPA's of 2.0 or better. Most striking, however, is that 78.7% of the entire low group had GPA's of 2.0 or better. One can only conclude from such evidence that either students are becoming remarkable overachievers, the testing approach is invalid, or faculty have chosen to overlook writing deficiencies and have graded students on other indications of achievement.

IV. Resources and Commitment

Plymouth State College has not made an extensive commitment to designing programs in reading or writing to address specific remedial needs or, in many cases, developmental ones. Students once on campus quickly discover that only limited resources are available to them if they wish to improve some of their skills in reading or to eliminate some of the basic writing deficiencies uncovered as a result of trying to do college level work. Simply enrolling in English 100 or even English 120 may not be the solution, for the student may need specialized help that can come only from diagnosis, prescription and tutorial aid from individuals specifically trained to handle special learning problems in these areas.

Special Services

Located in Reed House, Special Services is a federally funded program for disadvantaged students who qualify through low income status, disability or limited English speaking ability. The program addresses two major areas:

1. Essential Study Skills (time budgeting, note-taking skills, textbook reading skills, essay and objective examination preparation, effective utilization of the library, and term paper skills)

2. Specific Subject Area Assistance (a tutorial service in which selected upperclassmen are assigned clients who are having academic difficulties)

The Essential Study Skills component is developmental in nature and is neither designed nor staffed for remedial assistance. The component does, however, provide useful techniques with regard to study skills necessary for post-secondary success.

The tutorial service consists of approximately 25 upperclassmen recommended by department chairpersons at the college. Requests for tutorial service have been steadily increasing since the beginning of the program in 1976. Currently the Special Services program meets the needs of between 25 to 30 students, who are active participants in both components of the program. Tightly bound by federal guidelines, the program can serve only a very select group of students and thus cannot be counted upon to meet the needs of the general student population at Plymouth.

Reading Lab

Housed on the first floor of Reed House, the Reading Lab provides assistance to students experiencing reading or studying difficulties. The Lab is staffed by one member of the English department, with no reduction in teaching load. In most instances, a student is referred to the Lab by a faculty member. After initial diagnosis of the student's problem, the instructor and the student design either an individual or a small group program, which may be remedial or developmental in nature. College students enrolled in reading courses frequently provide help to students in the Lab. At the moment, the program meets the needs of approximately twenty-five students each semester, but lack of staff, time, and facilities make substantial enlargement of the program difficult.

Writing Courses

At the present time, the English department offers the following courses in writing:

Engl. 100	Fundamentals of English	No credit
Engl. 120	Composition I	3 credits
Engl. 231	Advanced Composition	3 credits
Engl. 263	Rhetoric	3 credits
Engl. 375-376	Creative Writing	3 credits each semester

Of these courses, only English 100 and English 120 are considered basic writing courses. Each semester, approximately 13-16 sections of English 120 are offered; 3 sections of English 100 are offered in the fall with no sections usually listed for the spring. The heavy emphasis on the basic writing courses requires almost 50% of the staff's time, leaving little time for offering additional offerings in remedial writing or reading without seriously affecting the overall English program offerings in the upper divisions. Occasionally developmental and critical reading courses can be offered on an overload or in-load basis. As a result of the present program, the English department cannot provide specific services on a wide-scale basis for a varied student population.

Perspective

Most colleges and universities have recognized the need for remedial and developmental programs in reading and writing. Whether it is done through special courses, programmed materials, closed circuit television or tutorials, some kind of commitment is made. As can be seen from the brief sketches of Plymouth's resources in this area, the college lacks a specific, well designed and active communication skills program. With a student body of over 2600 full-time students, simply meeting the needs of 75-80 students a year does not represent much of a commitment.

Not all students need remedial help, of course; what may be requested is aid in becoming a faster reader, in developing a larger vocabulary, in learning better study habits, and in receiving specialized help for specific writing and reading problems at the time when the need may be greatest. A well designed learning skills center could provide such services as well as meet remedial needs of students.[11]

Determining the exact size of the population which might benefit from a learning skills program that focuses primarily on writing and reading should not be difficult. Based on performance in proficiency examinations, on other tests administered from time to time by the English department, and through referrals from faculty outside the English department, it appears that a substantial population exists.

At the moment, faculty are uncertain where to refer students for help--or even if there is any help. Most students will not qualify for Special Services and the load of the English staff person in the Reading Lab has reached the maximum. Individual students may seek faculty members for extra time in tutorials; however, for the majority of students, the absence of appropriate services means that many of the problems which appear in students' class work will probably not receive the attention they deserve.

College-wide Involvement

In a survey done at the University of Illinois-Urbana, 85% of the faculty respondents believed that writing ability has a considerable or major effect on a student's professional future. Only 56.3% of the students responding to the same survey saw writing in this way.[12] One has to assume after examining student writing from a number of courses throughout the college at Plymouth that students do not perceive writing skill as important to success in college or even after graduation. Evidence cited in this report also supports that perception. Somewhere a gap has opened between faculty beliefs about writing and students' perceptions of writing.

Because of this situation, simply establishing a learning skills center or offering more courses in basic writing or reading will not solve all the reading or writing problems at Plymouth. Needed are college-wide commitment and involvement in the improvement of student skills. Elsewhere others are perceiving this need. Patricia Laurence

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[11] See Learning Skills Center: A CCC Report, Urbana, Illinois: National Council of Teachers of English, 1976.

[12] Roger Applebee and others, Report on the Status of Student Writing in the College, College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, University of Illinois at Urbana, 1976, p. 62.

of the City College, CUNY, has observed that "one of the most hopeful ideas... these days (despite academic territoriality which heightens during times of economic dearth) is the movement to unite content courses with a writing component. Intentionality and fluency in writing can best be found when the student is reponding to or learning about a way of viewing the world, a discipline--biology, history, literature, psychology, philosophy."[13]

The first positive step toward implementing the change to which Laurence alludes might be to establish a college-wide policy statement on the importance of effective student writing; such a statement might include the following points:[14]

1. That the clear, responsible use of the written and spoken language is the principal mark of the educated person.

2. That the faculty agrees that grades on papers which are poorly written, no matter what the course, should be reduced for the quality of the writing alone, if for no other reason.

3. That the faculty agrees that course grades may be lowered for persistently careless or otherwise sub-standard writing and that in extreme cases, a failing grade may be given for this reason alone.

4. That the college cannot offer a degree to any student whose careless and imprecise use of the language suggests a careless and imprecise intelligence; good writing, therefore, becomes a prerequisite for graduation.

Following the establishment of such a policy statement, the faculty should then agree on formal methods of involving themselves in upgrading communication skills. As to exactly what form these methods should take, considerable time and study will be necessary to make that determination.

To say that one will not require writing of students because they cannot write is simply to invite a continued drop in the level of writing skills. Without continuous practice, writing, like other skill activities, tends to atrophy. Certainly, the initial steps of getting students to write well are difficult and consume time; but unless we are ready to

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[13] From "Comment and Response," College English, October 1977, p. 233.

[14] Albert R. Kitzhaber, Themes, Theories, and Therapy: The Teaching of Writing in College, The Report of the Dartmouth Study of Student Writing, New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, Inc., 1963, pp. 151-152.

state in clear terms that writing skill is no longer of any great value in a college education, then we must begin to take steps to help students improve the quality of their writing and the first step in this direction is to require them to write and to write well, no matter what the assignment may be.

V. Recommendations

ENGLISH DEPARTMENT

The results of this study suggest that the following items should be considered by the English department:

1. That ways be explored to handle an anticipated increase in time for reading student essays if enrollment continues to rise. Serious consideration might be given to requiring all in-coming students to take either the TSWE or the ETS English Composition Test and the accompanying writing sample; the appropriateness of this change can be studied after the results of the 1977 December ETS testing session are available.

2. That if an objective examination is continued at Plymouth for placement purposes, consideration be given to using an objective examination which more closely approximates the kinds of writing activity expected in the writing process than the present one does.

3. That the English department review the content of English 120 and English 100 to determine how satisfactorily both courses are meeting the needs of students and the College's programs.

4. That a tighter control over enrollment in both English 120 and English 100 be maintained so that students who have not completed the appropriate test or requirements will not circumvent the procedures.

5. That the English department, with the approval of the faculty, make enrollment in Fundamentals of English mandatory for all students identified as needing it, enrollment to occur in the first full semester of matriculation after the student has taken the test.

6. That the English department recommend to the faculty that English 100 become a credit bearing course (3) which will remain as a pass/no pass offering, the course to be renamed Composition I and the present Composition I to be designated as Composition II.

7. That the English department monitor its grades in English 120 to determine if grade inflation is present.

8. That the English department develop greater communication among its members concerning methods and materials for teaching writing.

9. That the English department explore ways of increasing the services of the Reading Lab and consider the feasibility of expanding the program to include writing.

10. That the department make available to faculty in other departments its expertise in the teaching of writing; this might include sponsorship of faculty seminars on selected writing problems, team teaching approaches, informal discussion, and the development of a guide for responding to student writing.

11. That the English department explore ways of attracting a greater percentage of the students in the "high," or proficient category, to its offerings.

12. That articulation with high school English departments throughout the state be developed and maintained and that workshops and summer institutes for teachers of writing be organized.

13. That the English department devise ways to provide recognition to outstanding student writers.

14. That all members of the English department continue to be involved in the teaching of English 100 or 120.

FACULTY

The results of the study suggest that the faculty should consider the following recommendations:

1. That the faculty of Plymouth State College adopt a specific policy statement about the importance of writing and writing skill at Plymouth.

2. That the faculty approve a "second-level" requirement in writing beyond the achievement of basic proficiency or the completion of English 120.

3. That the faculty establish a Committee on Student Writing to demonstrate its concern about and interest in the writing skills of the student body; this committee must be an institution-wide body with at least one representative from each of the College's departments; purposes of this Committee could include the following:

    a. To make the concern about student writing on campus an ongoing issue.

    b. To dramatize through publication and other means, effective ways of dealing with student written work.

    c. To sponsor periodic training and evaluating sessions for instructors in all departments.

d. To serve as an arbiter in cases where consistent weak writing appears.

e. To serve as a referral and clearing agency for specialized help in correcting recurrent writing problems.

f. To advise all academic departments on ways of incorporating more writing activity into their courses.

4. That the faculty call for the establishment of a learning skills center which would focus on problems in reading, writing, speaking, listening, and study skills. This center would serve as a referral agency for students and would coordinate all tutoring activity dealing with basic communication skills. Students could be referred to the center by an instructor at any time or the students could seek help voluntarily.

5. That faculty stress more extensive use of written assignments and more emphasis be placed on the quality of writing in student reports, research papers, and essays.

6. That faculty carefully define what is expected in writing assignments in terms of audience, purpose and structure and that care be taken to make clear distinctions among essays, reports, and research papers when making assignments to students.

7. That faculty be more specific in course syllabi about the requirements for writing in courses and that evaluation procedures or indications about the weight given to the quality of writing be specified.

8. That faculty feel free to use the expertise of the English department in learning how to approach writing problems and how to adapt teaching strategies for writing in the content areas.

9. That faculty approve credit for English 100.

10. That faculty give serious consideration to implementing the reading proficiency requirement adopted in 1973.

11. That the faculty direct the Admissions Office to inform prospective students and high school guidance counselors of the need for students to present for admission, high school English requirements that reflect studies in language, literature and composition and that in all such work, significant attention should have been given to expository writing. Preference will be shown to students presenting such background.

Appendix A

GPA RANGES OF STUDENTS
RELATED TO PLACEMENT ON
ENGLISH COMPETENCY EXAMINATIONS
FROM 11/73 to 5/75

	HIGH GROUP n=172 %	MIDDLE GROUP n=30 (random sample) %	LOW GROUP n=216 %
I. ATTENDANCE			
Attending	25.6] 55.3	30.0] 60.0	26.9] 40.3
Graduated	29.7]	30.0]	13.4]
Withdrawn	42.4] 44.7	33.3] 40.0	41.7] 59.7
Dismissed	2.3]	6.7]	18.1]
II. GPA RANGE			
3.6-4.0	22.1	3.3	2.8
3.1-3.5	30.8	16.7	9.3
2.6-3.0	26.2	30.0	18.5
2.1-2.5	9.3	30.0	28.2
1.6-2.0	4.7	13.3	19.9
1.1-1.5	2.3	6.7	9.7
0.6-1.0	1.7	--	4.6
0.0-0.5	--	--	4.2
No record	2.9	--	2.7
	100.0	100.0	99.9
III. OTHER ENGLISH COURSES EXCEPT LITERATURE	Yes 50.6 No 49.4	Yes 70.0 No 30.0	Yes 44.0 No 56.0
IV. GPA OTHER ENGLISH COURSES EXCEPT LIT			
3.6-4.0	34.5	9.5	6.3
3.1-3.5	5.7	4.8	5.3
2.6-3.0	42.5	38.1	41.1

2.1-2.5	5.7	4.8	4.2
1.6-2.0	8.0	33.3	35.8
1.1-1.5	--	--	1.1
0.6-1.0	3.4	4.8	6.3
0.0-0.5	--	4.8	--
	98.8	100.1	100.1

V. LIT COURSES	Yes	40.7	Yes	33.3	Yes 22.7
	No	59.3	No	66.7	No 77.3

VI. GPA IN LIT COURSES

3.6-4.0	32.9	--	2.0
3.1-3.5	7.1	--	--
2.6-3.0	34.3	50.0	32.7
2.1-2.5	1.4	10.0	8.2
1.6-2.0	17.1	40.0	42.9
1.1-1.5	2.9	--	--
0.6-1.0	4.3	--	10.2
0.0-0.5	--	--	4.1
	100.0	100.0	100.1

VII. DISTRIBUTION OF MAJORS

ACCT/BUS ED	--	--	0.9
APP BUS	3.5	3.3	9.7
ART ED	2.3	6.7	4.6
BUS ADMIN	13.4	20.0	22.7
BUS ED	1.2	--	--
BUS MGMT	--	--	0.5
BIO/SCI ED	1.7	--	0.9
COMP BUS ED	1.7	--	0.5
ELEM ED	20.3	6.7	12.5
ENGLISH ED	1.7	--	0.5
FRENCH ED	--	--	0.5
GEN STUDIES	2.9	--	4.6
INTER DISC	5.8	3.3	2.3
LA - ART	2.3	--	1.4
LA - BIO	5.2	3.3	0.9
LA - ENG	2.9	6.7	0.9
LA - FRENCH	0.6	--	--

LA - HISTORY	0.6	--	2.8
LA - MATH	--	--	0.5
LA - MUSIC	3.4	--	0.9
LA - PSYCH	0.6	--	--
MATH ED	1.7	--	1.4
MUSIC ED	3.5	6.7	0.5
PHILOSOPHY	1.2	--	--
PE	10.5	16.7	18.0
PSYCH	4.1	6.7	3.2
SEC/BUS ED	--	--	0.5
SEC SCI	1.2	--	--
SOC SCI	1.2	--	1.9
SOC SCI ANTH	0.6	--	--
SOC SCI ED	2.3	3.3	0.5
SOC SCI GEOG	0.6	3.3	--
SOC SCI PUB MGMT	--	--	0.5
UNDECLARED	2.9	13.3	6.0
	99.9	100.0	100.1

VIII. GRADES RECEIVED IN COMPOSITION COURSE

A	9.3	13.3	3.7
B	8.7	20.0	14.8
C	2.3	23.3	44.0
D	0.6	--	8.3
F	--	--	3.7
CR (credit given)	50.6	26.7	3.7
IC (incomplete)	0.6	--	--
No Record	27.9	16.7	21.3
O (?)	--	--	0.5
	100.0	100.0	100.0

IX. GPA RANGES OF STUDENTS WHO WITHDREW (low group)

3.6-4.0	3.3	
3.1-3.5	8.9	56.7
2.6-3.0	16.7	
2.1-2.5	27.8	
1.6-2.0	22.2	
1.1-1.5	3.3	
0.6-1.0	2.2	
0.0-0.5	8.9	
No record	6.7	
	100.0	

Appendix B

ASSESSMENT OF BASIC COMMUNICATION SKILLS
FACULTY SURVEY

Please indicate your department or subject area: _____

1. Based on the assignments you give students, what reading skill is most essential for their success in your classes?

2. If you were to rate each of the following performance areas in reading, how important would each be for success in your courses? (Please use a rating of 1 to 5 for each item, 1 being the most important and 5 the least important).

_____ a. Understanding the main idea
_____ b. Reaching valid conclusions
_____ c. Making critical evaluations of content
_____ d. Comprehending significant details
_____ e. Drawing inferences
_____ f. Other (please specify) _____

3. What types of reading have you assigned for this semester (check as many as apply and add others if not listed).

_____ a. Entire textbook
_____ b. Articles from periodicals
_____ c. Abstracts
_____ d. Chapters from texts for supplementary reading
_____ e. Articles from newspapers
_____ f. Other _____

4. Approximately how many pages of reading do you require per week in each of your classes?

_____ a. Less than 50
_____ b. Between 50-100
_____ c. Over 100

5. How would you rate the reading skills of the majority of your students?

_____ a. Excellent
_____ b. More than adequate
_____ c. Adequate
_____ d. Poor

6. What is the single most significant reading STRENGTH you have observed among your students in the past year?

7. What is the single most significant reading WEAKNESS you have observed among your students in the past year?

8. If you were to rate each of the following writing performance areas, how important would each be for success in your courses? (Please use a scale of 1 to 5 for each item, 1 being the most important and 5 the least important).

_____ a. Organization
_____ b. Summarization
_____ c. Research skills
_____ d. Sentence structure
_____ e. Paragraph structure
_____ f. Vocabulary
_____ g. Usage
_____ h. Spelling
_____ i. Punctuation/capitalization
_____ j. Other _____

9. What kinds of writing have you assigned your classes this semester? (Check as many as apply).

_____ a. Research papers/reports
_____ b. Lab reports
_____ c. Lesson and/or unit plans
_____ d. Book reviews
_____ e. Abstracts
_____ f. Article reviews
_____ g. Logs/journals
_____ h. Essays
_____ i. Other _____

10. Excluding notetaking and exams or quizzes, approximately how often are students called upon to do writing for your classes? (If practice varies widely, take the nearest to the average frequency).

_____ a. Weekly
_____ b. Bi-weekly
_____ c. Monthly
_____ d. Once or twice a semester
_____ e. Other _____

11. What form of exam do you use in the majority of your classes?

_____ a. Objective
_____ b. Essay
_____ c. Combination objective/essay

12. In evaluating student papers, what weight do you give to the quality of the writing? (Check one).

_____ a. Extremely important
_____ b. More important than most other factors
_____ c. Equal in importance to other factors
_____ d. Less important than other factors
_____ e. None

13. What is the chief writing <u>weakness</u> you have observed in students in the past year?

14. What is the chief writing <u>strength</u> you have observed in students in the past year?

15. What specific recommendations would you offer to the Department of English about its freshman writing program?

PLEASE RETURN THIS SURVEY TO CHARLES DUKE, ENGLISH DEPARTMENT, REED HOUSE, NO LATER THAN OCTOBER 4.

Appendix C

ESSAY TOPICS USED IN ASSESSMENT STUDY

1. Societies commonly set minimum ages for such privileges and responsibilities as purchasing cigarettes, marrying, voting in elections, dropping out of school, holding a driver's license, buying liquor, and working for wages. The underlying principle of the minimum age law seems to be that maturity is directly related to age. But most people would agree that there is more to maturity than having reached a certain age.

   Directions: In a well-planned essay, discuss your reaction to the statement above; how would you define maturity? What roles, if any, does age play in achieving maturity? You may wish, in the course of your essay, to discuss some of the specific privileges mentioned above and draw upon your own experience as evidence for your position.

2. Authorities indicate that if you are a typical high school graduate today, you have spent about 21,000 hours viewing television, 17,000 hours watching movies, and 13,000 hours attending school. Obviously you have received a large number of varied messages from each of these sources. Research suggests that each of these sources can have considerable influence over how people view their own lives and the lives of others.

   Directions: Select at least one principal message you have received from each of these sources and explain in as much detail as possible how and why you have accepted, rejected or modified each one.

3. Are there advantages to the things we call progress? Are there disadvantages? Someone has stated: "What people in the United States call progress is simply replacing one nuisance with another."

   Directions: Using specific illustrations from your own experiences and knowledge, discuss in as much detail as possible the reasons why you would or would not agree with the quoted statement above.

Appendix D

COMPARISON OF RATINGS ON SELECTED ESSAYS

	Essay Designation	Group 1	Group 2	English Dept.	
	A	2 (2) 3 (1)	2 (2) 3 (1)	2	
	B	1 (3)	1 (3)	2	
	C	1 (3)	1 (1) 2 (2)	1	
	D	2 (1) 3 (2)	2 (1) 3 (2)	3	
***	E	3 (3)	3 (3)	3	***
	F	2 (3)	1 (1) 2 (1) 3 (1)	3	
	G	1 (2) 2 (1)	2 (3)	2	
	H	1 (2) 2 (1)	1 (2) 2 (1)	1	
	I	1 (2) 2 (1)	1 (2) 2 (1)	2	
	J	2 (1) 3 (2)	1 (2) 2 (1)	2	
	K	1 (2) 2 (1)	1 (3)	2	
***	L	1 (3)	1 (3)	1	***
***	M	1 (3)	1 (3)	1	***
	N	1 (2) 2 (1)	1 (2) 2 (1)	1	

Essay Designation	Group 1	Group 2	English Dept.
P	3 (3)	2 (1) 3 (2)	3
Q	2 (1) 3 (2)	2 (2) 3 (1)	3
R	1 (2) 2 (1)	1 (1) 2 (2)	2
S	2 (3)	1 (1) 2 (2)	2
T	2 (1) 3 (2)	2 (1) 3 (2)	3
U	2 (2) 3 (1)	2 (1) 3 (2)	2

Key: Group 1 comprised of representatives from Art, Philosophy and Foreign Languages.

Group 2 comprised of representatives from Natural Science, Physical Education and Education.

*** denotes unanimous agreement among all three rating groups.

( ) denotes number of votes for particular rating

Appendix E

PLYMOUTH STATE COLLEGE
ESSAY RATING EXPERIMENT
April 12, 1977
HOLIDAY INN, PLYMOUTH

Participants:	PSC, Philosophy PSC, Art PSC, Foreign Language
Staff:	Betty Gaines, Syracuse University Project Advance Charles Duke, PSC, English Department Joseph Durzo, NHCUC
Meeting began at:	2:40 p.m.

Ms. Gaines described the Essay Rating Experiment and distributed instructions to participants explaining what they would be asked to do. Charles Duke then explained why Plymouth was sponsoring this experiment. Participants were asked to read each of 20 handwritten student essays (3-5 pages) and to rate them as: 1-below average, 2-average, or 3-above average. They were asked to read the papers quickly and to make immediate rather than reactive judgments about the papers, spending no more than about five minutes on each paper. Ms. Gaines explained that later in the day there would be time to discuss the reasons each participant had for rating papers as they did. Participants were urged to react holistically, using whatever basis for judgment they would normally use (some comfortable mix of grammar vs. content, etc.).

Coffee was served during the rating process. At 3:15 all readers were encouraged to take a short break so that fatigue wouldn't interfere with their ratings.

By 3:45 p.m. all three participants had finished reading the twenty papers.

After the participants had finished reading the papers, Ms. Gaines explained that she had asked for a brief reading and judgment because the research shows that better rater reliability is gained from brief readings. Following that rationale statement, each person read his/her ratings and these were summarized on a tally sheet.

Once the ratings had been tallied, it was found that the participants had agreed completely (given identical scores) on two papers in each of the "below average," "average," and "above average" groups. The two papers in each group were then analyzed by the participants to determine the reasons why they received the ratings. The purpose of this activity was to derive from the participants' comments a set of characteristics describing papers in each group. Above average essays were discussed first, followed by below average essays and average essays.

Joe Durzo took notes during the discussion and Charles Duke listed characteristics on a chalkboard while Betty Gaines led the discussion. After each set of papers had been thoroughly analyzed and comments had been noted on the chalkboard, the comments were then analyzed and categorized. Categories of comments describing the characteristics of each of the three groups of essays were listed and agreed upon by the participants.

Discussion of Above Average Papers
(Papers "E " and "P"). Began at 3:50 p.m.

Note: Initials refer to person making a comment

Began with discussion of the "E" paper:

R --Vibrant - lots of alive description; handy things such as bringing your attention to a point and then making the point.

C --Language is superior. Greater variety of words; there are more nuances because of the superior ability to use language; more imaginative; organization is good.

M --Very readable; rhythm is good; do they speak to the point? The form is good; good logical development.

R --Underlining of important words - it expresses the point of view; makes it more personal.

M --No misspelled words; few errors in spelling or agreement.

R --Almost no errors in spelling or agreement.

C --Superior grammatical usage; for example, use of commas to offset changes.

R --Particularly liked the student's lack of the use of fillers such as: I think, I agree, in my opinion.

C --Superior expression of thought usually goes with good grammar. I don't grade on grammar, but they go together.

B --Why do you think this page flows well, or is readable as you noted? Is this because the student uses good transition between paragraphs?

C --Not too much paragraphing; use of syntax is good so you don't keep stopping short because of awkward constructions.

R --The writer sticks with one element and limits the topic to prove a point.

Discussion of the "P" paper:

B --Does "P" fit into the same general descriptive terms as the "E" paper?

C --Superior grammatical usage. I was impressed by the apostrophe in "aren't". Another point I made with "P" is that this writer brings in a little more personal background and makes it more interesting.

M --This paper got a 3 because it specifically pertains to what is being asked.

R --Far more errors, but I found them less disconcerting.

C --I was impressed by the concluding argument.

M --And yes, speaks to the point again.

R --I noted here that the paper is very clear.

B --Did the other paper use means of appropriate support for argument other than personal experience? Are we really talking about use of support?

C --"E" had better style, but "P" has better content, even though it suffers by comparison. I grade a paper on how much time has been spent in thinking about the problem.

B --Let's check to see which of the terms used to describe "E" also apply to "P."

R --"P" is alive but, not as "arty."

B --Do they both prepare the reader for what comes? How about language word selection?

R --Choice of adjectives is not as good in "P" as in "E."

M --The "P" is not as profuse in the selection of words. In "P" the writer says what she means in a direct way. It comes out in a slower manner.

R --It is more blunt.

C --"E" shows superior command of the language.

B --Form is equal in both papers?

All --Yes

B --How about spelling and agreement errors?

R --There are more in "P" but they are not crippling.

B --You said "E" had an absence of fillers, that it is more profuse, but not padded?

R --Slightly different because in "P" she uses "I think" etc., but this is not as bad as the use of "in my opinion."

C --I think that "P" can be faulted on its bluntness.

B --Grammatical or construction errors?

C --I wasn't aware of any poor grammar.

Discussion of the Below Average Papers
(Papers "L" and "M")

Began with a discussion of the "L" paper:

R --Just riddled with grammatical and spelling errors. There are 15 on the first page.

B --What about form? If we could classify our ideas according to the categories used for the above average papers...

R --Loaded with apologies -- every paragraph begins with one. They may not be apologies, but they are filler.

B --What about overall form? Does it have an introduction?

M --Leaps right into the argument with no introduction and really with no conclusions either.

R --But he doesn't answer the question.

M --Completely subjective without answering the question.

R --Doesn't speak to the point.

M --Not in good form to make it clear - no specifics; lack of support, examples, etc. Doesn't stick to the point.

C --No conclusion.

R --No organization.

B --Are the ideas simply presented as separate entities? No, it's not that it lacks organization because he does follow the topic as suggested in the instructions and the question.

B --No overall organization?

M --Yes.

B --Now is there anything else you would like to add about the language?

R --There is no punctuation; there is no subtlety. No sophistication or a variety in the paper.

B --Any positive things you want to say about the paper? You have said that the student attempts to follow the order of the question.

M --Tries to do the job, but needs help.

R --He is unschooled, but sincere.

M --This is sad. He appears to be trying to educate himself.

C --There is a degree of attempting to support what he says.

B --The student appears to understand what is necessary to support an argument?

R --His problems are due to his lack of background.

C --Some papers are dashed off without trying and others are sincere but have problems. This is a paper which is sincere.

B --In summary then...

R --He appears to be hemmed in by the cultural limitations of his background. He seems to lack the experience to help him address the questions.

M --I have a feeling it comes down to the basic skills.

Discussion of the "M" paper:

R --Full of grammar and spelling errors.

M --Yes, everything.

R --Puts you in a "right" state of mind -- almost incomprehensible even though I have a feeling of what he means.

M --Could be more precisely stated, but there is a germ of an idea there.

C --There is a good attempt at a conclusion.

R --Explains an opinion without directly answering; wordy and lots of repetition.

M --In these papers there seems to be an opinionated, biased point of view.

B --How about "Opinion is assumed as fact?"

M --I like that. Yes, that is it. The attitude of bias without any real substantiation comes through here.

C --It's not so much a bias as a limited horizon -- a much more limited range of experiences in his background.

B --Does it have clear organizational patterns?

M --It follows the question but the ideas are not related to each other. Plunk, plunk, plunk -- you get three things stated.

B --Lacks coherence?

M --Yes.

C --Also a contradiction -- no analytical understanding.

M --There is no logical development of his ideas.

C --That could be translated to a lack of imagination.

M --Yes, it could.

B --Now that you have seen these two papers together, do you have any last thoughts?

C --Superficial treatment.

B --Lack of direction seems to be an appropriate comment.

B --Does this student show a sincere attempt to answer?

M --I think it uses lots of filler.

R --Not much imagination. Student has been asked to respond to a question and does it.

R --No sentence variety; all about the same breadth and structure; conversational style.

M --Has some fragments.

B --The "M" paper then has some edge over the other?

All --Yes.

Discussion of the Average Papers
(Papers "F" and "S")
Began at 5:00 p.m.

Began with discussion of the "S" paper first:

B -- I suggest that we talk about the strengths and weaknesses of these papers, since they are harder to work with.

STRENGTHS

M --I found it difficult. I gave it a "1" and changed it to "2" because the ideas were sound.

C --Liked the thoughts and reasoning.

B --Why did you respond to them that way?

C --Because I endorse what this person is saying. It

WEAKNESSES

M --But he didn't develop the ideas; pretty short.

M --Not much support though; could have been better.

R --Frequent misspellings and the use of vague antecedents; lots of grammatical errors.

M --I found it hard to read, but I'm not sure why. It may be because he doesn't

is a good point. I favor the point of view because there are good reasons for it.

M --Ideas are reasonable.

C --Mature response or reaction to the question.

R --He supports what he says and logically developes his point.

stay with a point very long; lack of specifics.

R --My first problem is the 2nd sentence. "I feel that etc..." I had to go back to re-read the first sentence.

B -- Burden on the reader caused by faulty reference?

R --A certain amount of spark to it. There is a certain amount of variety of form and vivaciousness.

C --Good start but doesn't go on with points.

R --It may be that opinion is used as fact. Some sentence fragments. Handwriting makes it hard to read or translate.

B -- Is there an introduction?

M --He says "My first reaction is that..." It's a good opening and he leaps into the argument. He seems to know what he wants to say.

M --It's an adequate introduction. Not good, but adequate. I didn't wonder what the topic was.

B -- Is there a conclusion?

C --I wouldn't say it was a real conclusion.

M --That's right. There is no summary.

B -- Okay - it doesn't move to a conclusion.

C --The previous paragraph has some of the tones of a con-

clusion. He seems to have just stopped writing.

M --Last sentence should have been moved to make the prior sentence a conclusion.

C -- Doesn't move to a logical conclusion?

M --Yes.

C --Organization is poor.

R --If all sentences were rearranged it would be a better paper without changing a word.

R --Little planning.

C --It's a lack of organization throughout, not just in the conclusion.

B -- Does it have any other strengths? How about vocabulary?

M --It is alright. There are misspelled words but he knows how to use words.

C --In contrast to the #1 papers, this person's outlook seems more mature. There is thoughtfulness, but he needs help in expressing it.

C --Language is superior relative to #1's. For example, "society's role," etc.

R --Adequate vocabulary for a #2 and superior to #1.

C --There is also a little more variety in sentences. It doesn't start every sentence with "I".

R --I'm not impressed with vocabulary. I'm glad I don't get more of this type of paper.

C --He made some interesting statements but didn't support them well.

M --Yes, it is less self-centered. It reaches out.

M --This person has a broader view than just personal opinion.

C --Yes, he's insightful.

B -- Can we say the support is not adequate?

Discussion of the "F" paper:

STRENGTHS	WEAKNESSES
	R --Lots of repetition in using apology forms.
	C --Superficial and too broad.
	R --Tendency to be dogmatic.
	C --At some points it doesn't make sense.
	M --Structure hampers what could have been a very logical development of ideas. There is no punctuation or sentence structure.
M --He takes an idea and follows through logically but loses me in the form. He starts with an idea though.	
	C --I would challenge the assertion that it is logical.
	R --He says there is only <u>one</u> answer. Obtuse.
	C --There are contradictions.

B -- M, do you mean technical problems in use of language?

C --I gave it a "2" because he comes across as trying hard.	M --Yes.
	C --He has a system of thought

all his own.

C --He has ideas but he can't organize them.

R --I think it had a note of insincerity - cheapness.

C --Does that make it, insincere?

B -- Somehow his language is affecting R and C differently. Can you point out why?

C --If he had spent more time organizing he might have done better even with his limited skills.

R --Lots of filler and too wordy.

R --What I mean is wandering; not on the beam.

R --Imprecision of vocabulary leaves us hanging, trying to figure out what he means.

R --It is <u>not</u> horribly misspelled and grammatically incorrect.

R --It is vague, though.

C --Choice of words gives it a certain wit.

R --Shows a spark of intelligence.

C --Good choice of words.

B -- How about form?

C --Terrible, you need a map to follow it; lacks development.

R --Doesn't treat the question at all. He only takes the first two sentences of the question and responds to them.

B -- I'll ask again - is this still a "2"? You agreed on this one, but you don't give me many strengths? Do you want to make it a "1"?

C --No, he tried and his choice of words impressed me.

R --He sounds like a TV commercial which you shouldn't have to think about to understand.

R --There is a certain amount of thought in it.

C --He went beyond ideas which would have occurred to him quickly.

R --The person has a strong statement to make but it doesn't come across well.

M --It's alive.

P --There is a certain variety in sentence structure.

C --He uses cliches.

M --His cliches are probably something he <u>believes</u>, but they may suggest insincerity to some.

B -- So your comments about "S" show the <u>range</u> of a "2" paper. In this "F" paper you really are showing a paper which is on the <u>low end</u> of the "2" spectrum.

B -- Does it have an adequate introduction?

M --He does have some sort of introductory sentence. He stated a view and then began to oppose it.

C --He does make a conclusion signal even though it is not good.

C --Plunges right in.

M --If you hadn't read the question, you couldn't tell what the logic of the paper was.

B -- How about maturity of ideas as compared with a "1"?

R --Yes it is not good, but at least it defines its ideas.

THIS SESSION ENDED AT 6:10 P.M. AND THE GROUP ADJOURNED FOR DINNER.

Critique of Four Papers ("D", "R", "J", "N") on Which There was Disagreement Among Participants. (Began at 7:45 p.m.)

Betty asked the participants to examine four papers (D, R, J, N) which had received a range of scores and to re-evaluate them based on

the criteria established earlier for "above average," "average" and "below average" papers.

Discussion of "D":

R --I gave "D" a "3" and it's a mistake. As I read it over again there are so many things hanging; a clumsy phraseology. I didn't pick these things out before.

M --I guess I could change it from a "3" to a "2." Rereading it, the form...there is a good bit of grammatical... I like the ideas and felt that he had logically developed a theme, followed through, had a conclusion and so on. But, the sentences aren't very clear, really.

M --His paper isn't like everyone else's -- he brings in his personal experience. It's awkward to read, though.

R --He has very good ideas, but his phraseology is sometimes clumsy.

M --His form doesn't measure up to the ones I gave a "3."

B --Overall, it would be a "3" in standards of form, but should now be a "2" based on failing logic?

R --I understand what he's saying but it is badly phrased. Just a few changes and I'd be satisfied.

M --C, why did you give it a "2"?

C --Punctuation errors. What I like about it is that he draws from different resources. The #1 papers seem to show that writers are so limited in their experiences...they always refer to "I believe." This one is more interesting.

B --How do you feel about the idea, C?

C --Punctuation errors are here.

B --Where did the punctuation errors occur? Did they affect your understanding of it?

C --No apostrophe in "ones life."

C --Commas where they are not needed.

M --Now I'm coming around to believe that it is not so bad in comparison to the ones we gave a "3."

C --In the third page, for example, there's a comma in a sentence which does not need to be there.

R --I think the punctuation errors are relatively few, but there are certain phrases which are very clumsy.

C --Much repetition - the introduction is also the conclusion, and also appears in the middle.

B --Could you say that the problems would be awkwardness of expression, repetition and some punctuation in crucial areas?

All --Yes.

Discussion of "J":

R --I gave it a "3" again and I'd probably stick to it. There are some clumsy things to it, but I really like the flavor of it. I like the panache and dash of it all. It was very different.

C --I gave it a "3." I was impressed by his use of quotations around "necessary evil" and "norm." This is a sophisticated use of punctuation. He was being philosophical and able to know what he was doing.

M --It's loaded with misspellings and that really influenced me. Example: "wich" for "which." It gives me a bad impression on first reading. I gave it a "2" because it sounded quite illiterate.

B --Do you still feel that way?

M --I agree that there are some things that are above average.

C --There is a very insightful phrase in the first paragraph.

M --I would defer to the "3" ranking because spelling is my only objection.

Discussion of "N":

R --This is a "1."

M --This is a "1."

C --I had a "2."

R --There are some wonderful things in it (quotes from the paper).

C --"The" for "they" bothered me.

R --I couldn't figure that out either.

M --Fragments all through it.

C --It doesn't make sense at all (labors over trying to understand a series of sentences).

M --I'm not going to change... This is a "1."

R --C'mon, this is a zero! (humorously)

C --(Nods agreement.)

Discussion of "R":

R --I might lower this to a "1" from a "2." It's big writing, and short with clumsy sentences.

B --Is there a central idea?

R --This is given in the question; the question sets the idea.

B --But does he formulate a response?

R --A high "1" or low "2." He doesn't vary from the point and supports his statement with some personal observation; phraseology is clumsy and there is little evidence of planning. He's following the question.

M --It's a very immature approach to the problem of defining immaturity. There is little here except his own experience.

C --This appears to be a "limited horizon" person.

B --If there is an introduction, theme, and conclusion of some sort, I can see why you gave it a "2" R, since the other "1's" lacked those.

B --Do you now have some idea about the things which influence you most in a first reading?

R --Clarity and good phraseology. Spelling is second. I'm willing to overlook a lot of things for vivacity, sparkle, etc. I'm most impressed, however, by clear writing.

B --Nobody has mentioned transitions except me tonight. Could that explain what you all mean by clarity and easy reading?

M --The thing I look for first is whether or not they answered the question which was asked. I always look for that first. Then I look for novel approaches and ideas which aren't in all the other papers. After that I look for some logic, style, etc.

B --M, on the #3 papers did you have to go back to understand the question?

M --You can be seduced by style and give a high mark without noticing a lack of content.

B --C, what are the things that are most important to you?

C --Whether the student used critical analysis. That would be the rarest thing to find. There will be students who will do a good exposition paper with a weak attempt at analysis. What they do...what I ask them to do is to paraphrase. They often excerpt whole paragraphs with a sentence tacked on the front or back and think that this is expository writing.

ADJOURNED AT 8:30 p.m.

Appendix E (continued)

PLYMOUTH STATE COLLEGE
ESSAY RATING EXPERIMENT
APRIL 28, 1977
HOLIDAY INN, PLYMOUTH

Participants:	PSC, Natural Sciences PSC, Physical Education PSC, Education
Staff:	Charles Duke, PSC, English Department Doug Lyon, NHCUC
Meeting began at:	2:35 p.m.

Charles Duke described the essay rating experiment and distributed instructions to participants explaining what they would be asked to do. He explained the Plymouth State College English Department was sponsoring this experiment to discover the standards by which some of their colleagues in other areas rated essays in order to determine whether the English Department and other departments were using similar criteria.

Participants were asked to read each of 20 freshman essays and to rate them as: 1-below average, 2-average, or 3-above average. They were asked to read the papers quickly and to make immediate judgments, spending no more than 3-5 minutes on each paper. Participants were urged to react holistically, using whatever basis for judgment they would normally use. By 3:30 all three participants had finished reading the 20 papers and there was a short break for coffee.

After the coffee break and some informal discussion of the papers, each person read his or her ratings and these were summarized on a tally sheet. It was found that the participants had given identical scores to one paper in the "3" category, one paper in the "2" category, and four papers in the "1" category. In addition, there was one paper which each participant had given a different rating. Charles Duke than began a discussion which sought to elicit the characteristics best describing the papers in each group. Above average essays were discussed first, followed by below average essays and average essays. Doug Lyon took notes during the discussion and Charles Duke listed characteristics on the chalkboard as they were brought up.

Discussion began at 7:00 p.m.

Discussion of Paper "F":

Each person gave "F" a different rating.

M --I'm bothered by this idea of progress--progress as a thing.

D --I couldn't give it a "3" after he misspelled ignorance.

L --I liked the flow.

D --He didn't give specific illustrations.

L --Yes, that's right. There are not illustrations.

M --I might consider moving it to a "2," though it's still not clear what she means by progress. Progress is a thing.

D --It has strong development.

C --What do you mean by that?

D --The flow of the paper. It has good balance, good progression of the paper.

C --(To L) Would you agree with those comments?

L --Yes.

M --I wouldn't move it up to a "2."

L --I would go down to a "2." I guess I can't give it a "3" after she mispelled ignorance.

C --D, from what you say, it's a high "2."

D --Yes.

L --I think so.

Discussion of the "A" paper:

D --I'd give it a "2." Paragraph 2 is a problem. He didn't develop the thought. It uses the phrase "stand-in life," but it's not

clear what that means. There is less evidence than there should have been. He says a child smoking doesn't hurt society, but doesn't give any evidence.

L --On rereading I would give it a "2." It does not have a strong conclusion. Paragraphing is not good. It has multiple ideas in one paragraph.

C --That goes along with what D says about development.

M --Ideas are not expressed in depth. I agree with D on examples of that.

C --You seem to agree now. Anything else that makes it a "2"?

D --There is some personalization but not a great deal.

C --What about weak language fluency? Is that a characteristic?

M --It's more the ideas than the structure. Structure seems to be fairly good.

C --So there are no glaring structure problems but sufficient development problems to warrant a "2"?

D --That "stand-in life" quote is the best example of an idea that's left hanging.

C --Do the ideas in it have some merit?

D --Yes, I want to know more about what they had claimed. I wanted to know more about that phrase where they stand-in life.

Discussion of paper "U":

D --Part of my rationale was that it was better than I had read in a while. Relatively, it was a stronger document. The ideas were there and they were developed. It was easy to read (neat), easy to follow the arguments, and there were some examples stated that were not present in others.

C --Would you call that originality?

L --I should have given it a "3." Compared to other "3's" it should have had a "3." Compared to criteria it should be a "3." There are many examples, it is well concluded.

D --He commits himself to something. He thinks people should take exams to prove maturity.

C --She's willing to take a stand?

D --Yes.

C --M?

M --Maturity comes through more strongly than anything else.

C --Is there more personality?

L --I get that feeling that there is a real person behind the pen.

Discussion of paper "I":

D --I feel he addresses the issue using only one overused example.

C --You object to the logic?

D --Not to logic, but that's the only thing he says. He offers only one example. The grammar is a problem. There are misspellings. I can't follow the point.

L --I still go with a "2." The reasons are mostly intuitive. You get a feeling of coherence except for the statement on marriage. I think it holds together.

C --He sets progression?

L --I think there's a wholeness. He hasn't developed it much, but compared to other papers we've rated "1's" it has something to it.

C --I feel it shows personality.

L --Yes. It uses exclamations.

M --I gave it a "1" for grammar and spelling. But I felt that it came alive and that could move into a "2." It has the beginning of an individual style.

D --He doesn't specifically address the question and I was influenced by the length. It's very short but I might go to a "2."

L --It's a paradox. He has a kernel of an idea but he can't carry it out.

D --If he had used more examples...

C --He didn't exploit the question?

D --No, but I don't feel that uncomfortable about calling it a "2."

C --How important is length?

D --Unless the person is unusual or atypical, he can't cover a subject without spending several pages. Conciseness is the mark of an unusual college freshman.

L --Questions are detailed and when you put down only a couple of paragraphs, you are really not following the directions.

M --It's also hard to be concise in a short period of time. They only had an hour to write.

D --I remember something one of my professors told me. The length of an essay is like a woman's skirt, it should be long enough to cover the subject but short enough to be interesting.

M --It's hard to answer the question about length. It depends on a student's facility with the language.

D --One has to be careful by using length as a criterion, but generally with freshmen you can equate length and depth.

Discussion of paper "R":

D --Doesn't it appear to have reflected deep thought.

M --My "2" is based on the conclusion. She made an attempt to answer the questions. She does define maturity and that's what she was asked to do. The rest of it is not as strong but she did attempt to answer it. She made the effort--she came through, and she did try to give personal examples to support her definition.

D --The responses are elementary.

L --Yes, they're shallow.

M --They are not mature comparisons.

D --This may be another person who needs composition help more than remedial or grammatical help, but the paper is not as strong as other "2's."

L --No, it's not.

C --Is it a question of maturity of ideas as opposed to language control?

D --The language is immature. It's what you would expect of a ninth or tenth grade student.

M --There are misspellings and there isn't a depth of ideas. It doesn't have the personality that paper "I" did.

D --I'm on the school board and see children's papers occasionally. I guess I don't see this as college-level work. The person is responding but it's very shallow. I wouldn't object to making it a "2" and I wouldn't want this person to be from the composition section and not the grammar section. It may be that he didn't just have much chance to write in high school.

M --This is a verbal generation. Give them an oral examination and they come through well and express themselves well. We're an oral society.

Appendix F

SAMPLE ESSAYS FROM
HIGH, MIDDLE, AND LOW RATINGS

High Quality

My initial reaction to the statement "Maturity is directly related to age" is agreement with reservations. Whereas age alone does not confer maturity, life experience does. An individual who has lived eighteen, twenty, or twenty one years has had in that time a certain number of life experiences and hopefully has learned from them.

We all know that individuals who are chronilogically classified as adults vary greatly in their levels of maturity and yet in the eyes of the state they are all equally mature. How then is the state to know who is mature and who isn't?

My definition of maturity is the willingness to be responsible for one's own actions and the willingness to take the consequences of those actions. A mature person knows that he or she alone must answer for their decisions. Others may influence, but in the final analysis they alone are answerable.

There is no one age at which all people become mature adults. Some people find themselves making adult decisions at twelve or fourteen years of age. We find this frequently in homes where one or both parents are absent. Especially in cases where there are younger children, the oldest child in a family may take on adult responsibilities at an early age. On the other hand, we all know of people who literally never seem to grow up. People old enough to be collecting social security have never really learned to accept responsibility for their actions. When things go wrong it is always someone else who caused it: the boss, their spouse, "those nuts in Washington," society in general, or just "them" - a vague catchall for those unwilling to put the blame where it really belongs. Given this wide diversity, society sets minimum ages in an effort to be as fair as possible to all.

Having set minimum ages society imposes further restrictions on some of its privileges. Holding a drivers license is a privilege and not a right. One must prove competence behind the wheel and show a knowledge of traffic rules. As a privilege it can be revolked for misuse.

Sad to say students may drop out of school at sixteen. I feel that most young people do not realize the value of an education until it is, too late. Perhaps a visit to any crowded unemployment office should be mandetary before a high school student is allowed to make this decision final. This could be one of the most maturing experiences of a young life.

When is a person mature? Maybe the answer is never. If you believe that life is a constantly changing, learning experience then perhaps one is never completely mature. A thinking person is forever changing, revising and reassessing their ideals and goals in life. When will I be really mature? Society says I am mature now, but I say probably never, as long as there are new thoughts to think and new experiences to explore.

Middle Quality

I do not believe that when a person reaches a certain age he is mature, but I do aggree that we do need these set standards.

I am eighteen but I do not feel as though I have reached full maturity. The law though states that I am an adult, so I should act mature.

If I stopped going to school at fifteen and got a job I would be harassed by the school and probably some govenment official to quit my job and go back to school because I am too young. One year later in the eyes of the law I will be old enough to decide whether or not I want to quit. I might have profited more if I could have quit at fifteen and, on the other hand, still make the biggest mistake of my life by quitting when I reached sixteen. My level of maturity would be about the same in both cases and it should really depend on what I want to do in life.

If I was caught breaking the law as a minor, such as drinking or some minor offense, the court would be lenient and consider me a juvenile delinquent. When I an eighteen I am fined considerably more and there is always the possibility I will be with a minor whom I hung around with when I was a minor. Then I will will be contributing to the delinquency of a minor adding on another fine. I would either have to tell my friends that I cannot drink with them till they are eighteen or take the chance.

I am not really good at explaining myself but maturity is a state of mind. A person may reach at an early age or never at all.

The state makes these laws and they have to enforce them. Who am I to judge, although I always liked being a minor, after all I was just a kid.

Low Quality

I have accepted one of the most specific topics to be placed on a television set since the discovery of Cancer. Why have I accepted this ad, well because of what the ad said, that is why I have accepted it. For instance the ad says "Cigarette smoking may be harmful to your health" This add is true, because it has happened to one of my friends and it has really made me think about smoking and what it may do to me.

Smoking is a thing that children inherit from there parents, or they want to smoke cigarettes because all of there friends smoke. This is one of the reason Doctors warn you that it is hazardous to your health, so that young children will not smoke because there friends do.

I started smoking when I was fifteen and I started because my friends smoked and I thought it was some thing to do.

Now I regret the fact that I started to smoke because I have some trouble breathing and I cannot run as far as I could when I didn't smoke.

My father smoke for twenty years and the doctors told him to stop or he would put on so much weight that he might develope a heart condition.

Well he hasn't smoked a cigarette for eight years now and has lost some of the weight he gained from smoking. That is why this message is so important to me because it could have resulted in the loss of my father and it will kill more people in the future, if people continue to smoke cigarettes. This is why the government has forbidden the advertisment of cigarettes on television.

This is to get people to try and quit and save there own lives plus others if they don't smoke, some one else might get the idea from you not to smoke and they might save there own life from not smoking. Thanks to your example of not smoking yourself.

Appendix G: SYNTACTIC CHARACTERISTICS OF SAMPLE ESSAYS

	Rating	Total no. t-units	Total no. words	Ave. length of t-units	No. adjective clauses	No. adverb clauses	No. noun clauses	No. main clauses	Ave. no. clauses per t-unit	Ave. no. words per clause	No. of initial free modif.	No. medial free modif.	No. final free modif.	No. of paragraphs	Ave. no. words per paragraph
Essay A	2	34	508	14.9	4	12	20	34	2.1	7.0	1	1	1	6	84.6
Essay B	1	14	210	15.0	3	3	2	14	1.5	9.5	3	2	2	5	42.0
Essay C	1	14	253	18.0	4	8	5	14	2.2	8.1	2	5	1	4	63.2
Essay D	3	24	340	14.1	1	2	5	24	1.3	10.6	2	4	2	7	48.5
Essay E	3	41	608	14.8	12	2	9	41	1.5	9.5	3	7	9	5	121.6
Essay F	2	21	369	17.5	12	6	8	21	2.2	6.4	0	0	2	7	52.7
Essay G	2	22	327	14.8	2	12	7	22	1.9	7.6	1	1	3	5	65.4
Essay H	1	24	309	12.9	3	5	1	24	1.3	9.3	2	0	0	3	103.0
Essay I	1	19	242	12.7	1	6	9	19	1.8	6.9	0	0	1	3	80.2
Essay J	2	21	297	14.1	3	5	3	21	1.5	9.2	5	5	2	4	74.2

	Rating	Total no. t-units	Total no. words	Ave. length of t-units	No. adjective clauses	No. adverb clauses	No. noun clauses	No. main clauses	Ave. no. clauses per t-unit	Ave. no. words per clause	No. of initial free modif.	No. medial free modif.	No. final free modif.	No. of paragraphs	Ave. no. words per paragraph
Essay K	1	11	206	18.7	5	6	4	11	2.3	7.9	0	0	0	2	103.0
Essay L	1	31	449	14.4	5	7	9	31	2.4	8.6	3	1	1	10	44.9
Essay M	1	18	297	16.5	10	4	4	18	2.0	8.2	0	2	0	7	42.7
Essay N	1	19	295	15.5	4	7	3	19	1.7	8.9	0	1	0	9	32.7
Essay P	3	21	271	12.9	4	3	2	21	1.4	9.0	0	0	2	6	45.1
Essay Q	3	42	570	13.5	8	7	8	42	1.3	8.7	1	0	0	9	63.3
Essay R	2	14	200	14.2	1	3	2	14	1.4	10.0	0	0	0	5	40.0
Essay S	2	14	212	15.1	2	5	5	14	1.8	8.1	1	0	0	7	30.2
Essay T	3	22	427	19.4	6	1	8	22	1.6	11.0	3	6	7	7	61.0
Essay U	2	28	424	15.1	5	8	9	28	1.7	8.4	5	1	0	6	70.6

Appendix H

TECHNICAL CHARACTERISTICS OF WRITING TEST SAMPLE

The student essays employed in the faculty rating sessions described in Section III of this report also were examined to determine some of the syntactical and mechanical characteristics of the writing. These characteristics were tabulated to provide a view of the syntactic fluency and the control of mechanics writers in each of the categories of high (proficient), middle (ready for English 120) and low (ready for English 100) possessed. Each category contained at least five essays, providing an approximate sample of 1300 words for each group.

Ten items, originally identified by the research of Frank O'Hare (1973)[15], formed the basis for the syntactical analysis.

Table 17

SYNTACTICAL CHARACTERISTICS OF SAMPLE ESSAYS

Characteristic	Low Group	Middle Group	High Group
Ave. no. of t-units	18.7	22.0	30.0
Ave. no. of words in essay	282.5	233.8	443.0
Ave. word length of t-unit	15.4	15.1	14.9
Ave. no. of adjective clauses	4.3	4.1	6.2
Ave. no. of adverb clauses	5.7	7.2	3.0
Ave. no. of noun clauses	4.6	7.7	6.4
Ave. no. of clauses per t-unit	1.9	1.8	1.4
Ave. no. of words per clause	8.4	8.1	9.7
Ave. no. of paragraphs	5.3	5.7	6.8
Ave. no. of words per paragraph	63.9	59.5	67.9

The information in Table 17 provides the following profile of Plymouth students. Students in the low group use 37% fewer t-units (main clauses plus all dependent clauses and phrases syntactically related to the main clauses) than students in the high group; writers in the middle group use 26% fewer t-units than the high group. The average word length of t-units in each group, however, is very similar.

[15] Frank O'Hare, Sentence Combining: Improving Student Writing Without Formal Grammar Instruction, NCTE Research Report No. 15, Urbana, Illinois: National Council of Teachers of English.

Substantial differences exist in the length of essays. Students in the low group write essays 36% shorter than those in the high group, but the writers in the middle group produce essays 47% shorter than those in the high group. Essays in the low and middle group have approximately the same number of paragraphs while essays in the high category tend to average about a paragraph more. The shortest paragraphs appear in the middle group, the longest in the high category.

Subordination tends to be greatest in the essays of the middle group with adverb and noun clauses predominating. Writers in the high group do not use many adverb clauses, preferring adjective and noun clause structures, and have the fewest clauses per t-unit but the greatest number of words per clause, perhaps suggesting a more sophisticated syntactic sense.

Although by itself syntactic measurement does not provide a complete picture of a student's writing skill, nevertheless it does provide some insight as to the growth or lack of growth in students' abilities to develop a more sophisticated syntax as they mature. One of the basic assumptions of such measurement is that as students mature, they tend to write more words per terminable unit (t-unit).

The Plymouth study used syntactic measurement as a means for seeing what, if any, connection syntactic maturity might have with the ratings given to essays by faculty readers. A substantial correlation between the essay ratings and the syntactic maturity of the writers appeared. The most marked relationships occurred in the high and low groups; the distinction between the low and middle groups tended to be far less evident and, in some cases, almost nonexistent.

Another element used to determine syntactic fluency was the degree of free modification present in students' writing. The hypothesis was that the better student writer would tend to use a higher degree of free modification. Using contemporary authors' writings, Francis Christensen discovered that a large number of modern authors tended to use what he called "free modification,"[16] or modification not embedded in the main clause but free to be moved around in the sentence. The transformational grammarian might call the same process a variation of right, left, and middle branching. The following example shows the three basic positions for this modification:

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[16] Francis Christensen, Notes Toward a New Rhetoric, New York: Harper and Row, 1967.

INITIAL MODIFIER MEDIAL MODIFIER
/Walking easily into the store,/Les Barker,/whom we all knew from our viewing of him in the Tarzan movies,/caused a tremendous confusion
FINAL MODIFIERS
among the clerks,/some of whom forgot what they were doing, deserting their cash registers and rushing for the center of the store where they could get a better view./

The use of free modification calls for considerable knowledge about syntax and punctuation, as well as the fairly sophisticated employment of transformations; as a result, most students, particularly college freshmen, may not exhibit much fluency in the process. Christensen, however, designed a programmed approach for teaching the process--THE CHRISTENSEN RHETORIC PROGRAM (Harper and Row)--which is used in a number of secondary schools as well as colleges and universities.

An analysis of the results of the syntactic fluency survey at Plymouth shows that in terms of free modification, at least, writers in the high group do use free modification more frequently than those in the low and middle groups. Both medial and final modification seem to be more the province of the better writer while initial modification is basically the same in all groups. See the comparison in Table 18.

Table 18

CHARACTERISTICS OF FREE MODIFICATION IN SAMPLE ESSAYS

Modification	Low Group Average	Middle Group Average	High Group Average
Initial	1.3	1.8	1.8
Medial	1.3	1.1	3.4
Final	.6	.8	4.0
Average	1.1	1.2	3.1

SM Test

An additional effort was made to determine the reliability of the general assumptions about differences in syntactic maturity among the three categories. A sample of students who had been identified as belonging in the "low" group and students who could be classified in the "high" group took the Syntactic Maturity Test, an instrument devised by Roy O'Donnell and Kellogg W. Hunt.[17] The purpose of the instrument is to measure the syntactic maturity of writers from grade four to adulthood. This instrument is sufficiently well established so that it may be used by researchers as an efficient and simple way of determining syntactic maturity, thus avoiding the laborious process of counting t-units in one thousand words or more.

The SMT differs in one important aspect from an impromptu essay in that the problem assigned to writers is designed to control what they say but not how they say it. Hence everyone is supposed to say the same thing but to say it in his own way. This procedure omits the problem of differences due to subject matter or content. The only difference in the output of one writer compared to another is put there by the individual writer.

The passage used for the SMT consists of thirty-two sentences of connected discourse describing the manufacture of aluminum. Although a coherent paragraph, the piece contains unusually short sentences (three to five words in most cases). The test-taker is asked to rewrite the paragraph, combining sentences in any way possible, without omitting any of the information. The resulting new paragraph is then analyzed for either mean t-unit length or mean clause length and that count is the measure of maturity.

O'Donnell and Hunt in establishing norms for the SMT tested children in grades 4, 6, 8, 10 and 12--five grades at two year intervals, covering a span of eight years. From each grade, 50 children were selected whose scores on standardized achievement or intelligence tests provided a normal distribution among high, middle and low. In addition to the population of school age children, the researchers asked 25 adults who recently had published articles in Harpers and Atlantic to rewrite the passage; presumably these adults were skilled writers. An additional 25 people who were high school graduates and who had been out of school for ten years also participated in the study. The purpose of including them

[17] See Kellogg W. Hunt, "Early Blooming and Late Blooming Syntactic Structures," in Charles R. Cooper and Lee Odell, eds., Evaluating Writing: Describing, Measuring, Judging, Urbana, Illinois: National Council of Teachers of English, 1977, pp. 91-104.

was to determine whether, supposing they were average adults, their performance was more like that of the skilled adults or more like that of twelfth graders. The results are shown in Table 19.

Table 19

NORMS FOR SYNTACTIC MATURITY TEST

Grade Level	4	6	8	10	12	Ave. Adult	Skilled Adult
Ave. no. of words per t-unit	5.4	6.8	9.8	10.4	11.3	11.9	14.8

The evidence in Table 19 shows that average adults are much more like twelfth graders in their syntactic maturity while skilled adults are far superior to all groups. Thirty-four students in the low group and fourteen students in the high group formed the sample population for the Plymouth study. Students in Plymouth's high group come quite close to the syntactic maturity of skilled adults while the students in the low group perform similar to students in the eighth grade. Their performance is indicated in Table 20.

Table 20

SYNTACTIC MATURITY TEST PERFORMANCE: PLYMOUTH STUDENTS

Characteristic	High Group (n=14)	Low Group (n=34)
Ave. no. of t-units	7.9	12.4
Ave. no. of words in rewritten passage	104.0	118.0
Ave. no. of words per t-unit	13.9	9.8

From the various pieces of evidence cited thus far, one can conclude that the general proficiency placement system in operation at Plymouth seems to sufficiently discriminate among levels of syntactic ability to be a valid operation. What the SMT and similar measures do not do is measure the intellectual and logical processes contained in the t-units; for this reason, researchers hope to devise additional measures that will supplement the present t-unit procedure.[18]

Mechanics

Another area often questioned by faculty is student control of mechanics. Although the term often means many things to many people, faculty are usually most emphatic about what they perceive as being the poor skill in mechanics of expression. In an effort to determine what might constitute mechanical errors in the eyes of faculty, a fairly sweeping definition was used, the same one employed by the National Assessment of Educational Progress in 1969. The NAEP included not only such things as capitalization, spelling and punctuation but also agreement. The test population for the NAEP study included young people at ages 9, 13, and 17. For the purposes of comparison, only age 17 is used here.[19]

To arrive at a comparison with the NAEP study, 2000 words were examined from the 20 essays used as a basis for the Plymouth study; also included was a sample of 2000 words from a random selection of papers submitted by faculty members at Plymouth and identified by the faculty members as being of poor quality; the papers used were not in-class ones but were assignments done outside of class. This allowed a comparison to be made between the degree of mechanical error in a timed writing situation--one hour, subject not previously announced--to the degree of mechanical error in papers written outside of class on topics that may or may not have been directly assigned. The results of the survey are shown in Table 21.

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[18] See Lee Odell, "Measuring Changes in Intellectual Processes as One Dimension of Growth in Writing," in Charles R. Cooper and Lee Odell, eds., Evaluating Writing: Describing, Measuring, Judging, Urbana, Illinois: National Council of Teachers of English, 1977, pp. 107-132.

[19] See John C. Mellon, National Assessment and the Teaching of English, Urbana, Illinois: National Council of Teachers of English, 1975, pp. 30-32.

Table 21

COMPARISON OF MECHANICAL ERROR FREQUENCY PER 100 WORDS

	NAEP	Proficiency Sample	Class Writing
		HIGH GROUP	
Spelling	1.2	0.8	1.4
Punctuation	2.1	0.2	1.9
Capitalization	0.6	0.0	0.1
Fragments	0.5	0.0	0.3
Run-ons	0.6	0.0	0.3
Agreement	0.9	0.2	0.1
Tense	---	0.0	0.1
		MIDDLE GROUP	
Spelling	1.9	0.9	1.4
Punctuation	2.5	0.6	1.9
Capitalization	0.7	0.0	0.1
Fragments	0.6	0.0	0.3
Run-ons	0.6	0.3	0.3
Agreement	1.2	0.0	0.1
Tense	---	0.0	0.1
		LOW GROUP	
Spelling	3.6	5.2	1.4
Punctuation	3.1	1.5	1.9
Capitalization	1.0	0.0	0.1
Fragments	0.8	0.0	0.3
Run-ons	1.6	0.0	0.3
Agreement	2.5	2.0	0.1
Tense	---	0.3	0.1

Note: For class writing samples no distinction of grouping was possible; hence, all figures under the class writing in each group are the same.

The NAEP found in its study of 9, 13, and 17 year old students, that the number of errors in each age group tended not to diminish markedly over the span of years; the exception was spelling where a 50 per cent reduction occurred over each four year period. The results in the Plymouth study indicate that, as might be expected, the low group has the highest number of errors in almost all categories. But since there was no way to determine which of the writers in the class writing samples were in the low, middle or high categories, the statistics cannot be refined. Nevertheless, some of the ratings in the class samples compared with those in the test situation are interesting. For example, the number of spelling errors jump between test situation and class situation in both the high and middle categories; the same is true of punctuation. This change may be attributable to several things. In a test situation where the writing is known to be evaluated, students undoubtedly focus more on eliminating errors if they can; in classes where the emphasis on writing skill may not be so obvious, the student may take less care with his work. Still another possibility is that the student is working with more complex material in his class assignments and thus may be prone to making more mechanical errors. Both of these suppositions have no concrete basis other than on teachers' simple observation.

Considering the apparent lack of numerous errors in mechanics, one must suppose that much of the writing weakness which causes faculty concern may not be the students' lack of grammatical skill, but their inability to organize thoughts logically and to develop their ideas and findings in a coherent fashion. A study of the papers submitted by faculty members indicated that these problems plus such things as failing to address the question or failing to perceive the divisions of a question led to inappropriate and ineffective answers. Granted, spelling errors were quite abundant in many papers but over a span of several pages, the errors were not always as plentiful as they might seem on first glance.

Traditionally there has been a call from many areas of education to give students more grammar and more drill. The findings of the NAEP and those of the limited study done at Plymouth would seem to suggest that such calls are not entirely appropriate. Except for spelling, a high error rate in various grammatical and mechanical aspects of writing does not seem to exist. This would tend to suggest that extensive drill and extra doses of grammar are not particularly useful at this level. Time might be more practically and fruitfully spent on helping students develop a higher degree of skill in analyzing a question, focusing on a thesis, and developing supporting evidence in a coherent and logical fashion.

As students grow older, they continue to experiment with more mature syntactical structures; in the process, they make some errors.

High school and college teachers should be pleased that students are extending their writing skills and instead of criticizing the elementary and junior high school teachers for not doing their job, instructors should help students as they seek a more mature way of expressing their thoughts. Mechanics are, after all, only one aspect of the writing process. Until thought has been expressed and put together in some logical format, attention to mechanical aspects such as spelling and punctuation will garner little. Once the direction of a piece of writing has been established and the student has focused on what it is that must be said, then the concern for editing and proofreading can be stressed.